

The Question at Christmas

Advent 4 Year B Luke 1:26-38 December 20, 2020

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The first Christmas that Meredith and I were married we were invited out for dinner and then we planned to head off to spend a few days with family. That was until we woke that morning and discovered we were in the middle of an unforecasted blizzard. The roads and visibility were so bad that we had to cancel our plans to join a neighbor for a traditional Christmas Dinner with all the trimmings. That was disappointing. But I had picked up a duck for us to cook for New Years and we decided to cook it on the 25th instead. That proved to be even more disappointing and we have never had duck since. The storm continued throughout the day and with no end in sight we had to cancel plans to see our families that year. Which was yet another disappoint.

We made the best of the day, exchanged the few small gifts we had for each other and decided to watch a Christmas movie. There was no internet and our television only picked up a few stations and the only movie we could find on television was a cheesy 1980's swords and sorcery movie called Beastmaster. No big dinner with neighbors, no decent dinner at home, no family gathering, very humble presents and no Christmas movie. Yet honestly that year that is one of my favorite Christmases.

This morning's gospel reading is the angel Gabriel coming to speak to Mary. The angel's message is just what we expect - that Mary is to become pregnant with the promised Messiah and that through that child God will transform and change the world. It's not a message that we are particularly surprised about as we know Mary's part in the Christmas story and her faith throughout the life of Jesus and even after his death and resurrection.

But what is surprising is that what Gabriel brings isn't actually an announcement but rather a question. Because what the angel says isn't that "these things are going to happen to you, Mary" but rather a request for her to be a part of what God is going to do. Gabriel paints the broad strokes of what could take place and when Mary asks how this could happen in her life since she is a virgin, Gabriel explains that nothing is impossible with God. And then Mary responds.

She responds by saying "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." in other words "yes" and that is when Gabriel leaves and

the familiar events, of Mary becoming pregnant, of Joseph and his struggle with her pregnancy, and especially of the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in the manger, the announcement of the angels, and the excitement of the shepherds all unfold.

And all of that happens because Mary says yes. All of that takes place because Mary trusts and believes in God and is willing to be part of what God is doing. All of it that begins because Mary has faith and is willing to work to make what God wants to happen take place through her life. Mary says yes to being the mother of Jesus.

And let's be clear that this is a leap of faith for Mary. She has no idea what is coming and what it will be like to be the mother of the Messiah. But I expect she understands that it will not be easy. That there will be opposition and challenges, and the path in front of her will be difficult.

Let's face it, she is agreeing to be pregnant with no husband in a time when that was dangerous for a young woman. And she knows that there are people with power, like King Herod and the Romans, who will react violently to anyone daring to upset the way things are in the world. So Mary is agreeing to a future that is filled with uncertainty. Yet she says yes.

She doesn't say yes because she knows absolutely everything that is going to happen in her life but rather she says yes because she is one of God's people. She knows that God will bring about what is promised and for her being part of that promise, being the means by which the promise is seen and known, is worth whatever she has to do. She says yes because she trusts in God's goodness and wisdom.

I can't really tell you the reason why that first Christmas with Meredith is one of my favorites. Certainly I was happy to spend the holiday with her and you tend to remember fondly the firsts in married life and we were together in our first house for the first December 25th together. But so much went wrong, was unexpected, was not what we planned that it seems like it should be one of my least favourite Christmases. Yet I remember enjoying the day, and the memory of failing to make the duck edible and watching not one but three cheesy Beastmaster movies still makes both of us smile.

The truth is that Christmas is not about presents, gatherings, decorations, family meals or anything else we do this month. Certainly those things can help us enjoy the season and can be a wonderful part of our celebrations. But the truth is that Christmas is about us receiving what God offers to us in Jesus and about us agreeing to be a part of the love and grace which God brings to the world.

Christmas is a question to us. And our response is not to plan a lot, to buy the right presents, or even to make sure we follow holiday traditions but rather to open our hearts and agree to be a part of what God is doing.

Christmas is about us being filled with hope because we trust God to bring about a tomorrow that we can not see or imagine. Christmas is about us being filled with peace because we believe that God is with us even when life falls apart or the world is in chaos. Christmas is about us experiencing joy in what God offers to us and knowing that we are precious and important to God. Christmas is about us discovering and welcoming the love of God into our lives and choosing to live in response as a follower of Jesus.

I don't know what the next few days look like for you. I know the Christmas celebration at our house this year is much quieter and closer to home than they have been in years past. I know that some of what we intended to have as presents are stuck somewhere in the postal system and probably won't arrive by the 25th. And some of what we may do is still up in the air. But you know what? Christmas is still going to come and the possibility of what God can do when we say yes doesn't change.

For no matter what happens we can still look for the star shining in the sky reminding us that God is doing great things and let its light show us the way to discover something even greater. We can still listen to the angels singing out in celebration that the promise of heaven is now on earth and we can join our hearts and voices with them. We can still go with the shepherds and witness for ourselves the things that God is doing.

And we can still say yes to God like Mary and experience the promise of God taking shape within our lives as we become part of God's plan and intention for the world through Jesus Christ.