

## Sermon 24 December 2023 – Fourth Sunday in advent

Christmas comes close on the heels of the fourth Sunday of Advent this year. Today we hear about Mary's pregnancy and tomorrow we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Barely giving us a chance to focus, reflect or ponder Gabriel's visit to Mary. What it meant for her and what it means for us today. But it does provide for an easy flow – a continuity – for us, from the prayer and preparation and waiting of advent to the much-anticipated celebration of the coming of the Messiah at Christmas.

This brief period gives us some indication of what Mary may possibly have been feeling when the angel Gabriel appeared to her with an invitation. One that required an answer right away. Allowing for very little time to ponder what it all meant in that moment and for the future. However, I doubt any amount of reflection would have provided Mary with the full future implications of saying "yes" to God's invitation and plan in that moment. There are times in our lives when we too face situations that require us to respond without knowing the full implications.

In the first reading David wants to build a house for the Lord. But God says no, I will do it in my time and according to my plan not yours. When we look at this in conjunction with the gospel reading, we hear and see that God wants a home that is closer to home. God wants to move – make a home - a lot closer than in a temple on a hill.

There is searching and pondering and fear. There is praise, favour, and acceptance in our readings today. So how do we go from one such set of feelings, emotions, and circumstances – the pondering, searching and fear - to the other – the praise, favour, and acceptance - in our daily lives and in our walk with God?

"How to say yes to a life you did not choose." These are the words of Jan Richardson (<http://adventdoor.com/2016/12/18/advent-4-blessing-of-courage/>) as she sought to make sense of her life - her new normal - after her spouse died. After all, she chose a life with her spouse, not one without him. Now we can agree that none of us would choose to lose a loved one. None of us would choose illness, wayward children, and absent parents for our lives. But we can also agree that these are all aspects that we all face in lives. The grief of death, the pain and heartache we experience all tells us that there was /is life and love and relationship. Would we prefer not to have shared life and love and relationship if it meant we would be spared the grief, heartache, pain, and disillusionment of carrying these burdens that we did not choose?

Pause. Take a moment to reflect on these words: “How to say yes to a life you did not choose.” What do these words mean for you? What do they say to you? What are the things you chose/ did not choose for your life and how do you feel about this? These words can speak to a range of circumstances and not only to situations of death, grief, pain, and disillusionment. Some circumstances can be good as well. But that does not make them any easier to live out. In my case, I said yes to becoming a priest. A lengthy process of discernment but still with uncertainty in many ways. This brings with it many changes in the way I live my life – I can no longer “party” on Friday or Saturday nights. I have sermons to write. If I do, I need to be home early in preparation for Sunday services. This impacts my relationships with family and friends. Avril and Aimee have had to adjust. They do not necessarily choose all the things that come with me being a priest. They do not necessarily choose the things that they are required/expected to do because I am a priest. They have had to say yes to a particular type of life that they did not choose.

Initially these words resonated with me as I thought about the different things that are part of my life that are not of my own choosing. I reflected on Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel and wondered about her response to the angel. Surely, this could not have been a life she would willingly choose for herself - a young pregnant teenager on the brink of marriage. All her plans, dreams in jeopardy - disrupted without any idea of the long-term consequences. Surely this would not have been Joseph's life choice – to marry a pregnant woman and raise a child that was not his.

The more I reflected and pondered these words, the more I realised that when we choose God, we choose to enter into the mystery of God's plan. A plan that we don't have full insight, or oversight, of. A plan for which Paul, in our second reading, says, God makes us strong through the revelation of Jesus Christ - the truth – first made known through the prophets and now to all people through faith.

The Message version of the Bible in verses 28-31 says, ‘Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you. She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, **"Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.'..."**

Yes, what an unsettling greeting and what a surprise indeed! But that is the God we worship and serve. A God of surprises. A God of disruption. Because God sees the beauty in each one of us and God is with us. From the first reading, we see that God chose, King David, and in the Gospel reading, Mary, to be instruments in the fulfilment of God's plan for the human race. Probably not in the way they would have chosen. God chooses us today. (Probably also in ways that we are not of our choosing or that we are comfortable with.) To make his home in our hearts. In our lives. So that we too can be vessels for God's love and salvation revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

It took courage for Mary to say "yes." It takes courage for us to say "yes" but God says, "...favoured one! The Lord is with you." "Do not be afraid" for "nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1: 28, 30, 37) Will it be easy and plain sailing? No! But God gives us the gift of courage - "Do not be afraid" - and the assurance that "The Lord is with you." The promise - that "nothing will be impossible with God," despite how impossible the circumstances or situations we face may seem to us.

And so, I pray that we may we choose to say "yes" to "God's moment-by-moment and long-term vision for our lives" and the lives of all God's children around us. (Bruce Epperly, <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-b-december-24-2023/>). For it is God who strengthens us in faith through God's word and the incarnate revelation of Jesus Christ. And so, in the words of Jan Richardson, may we "cultivate an openness to that message, to the Word that longs to find a home in me, in us?" (Jan Richardson <http://adventdoor.com/2007/12/20/door-20-getting-the-message/>)

Amen