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Luke 1:26-38
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The Courage of YES

There have been some great announcements in history. I can remember a November morning in 1963 at recess. Suddenly, our teachers were herding us back into class.

There we sat, when an announcement came over the intercom. President Kennedy had been shot.

I remember being in a hotel room in Sacramento, back in 2001, just getting out of bed, turning on the TV and seeing a plane fly into the World Trade Center and the announcement that this wasn't a movie, but real life.

Announcements like these break into time, and one remembers where they were and what they were doing when they happened.

But no announcement was greater than the one that God made through the Angel Gabriel that God was about to become personally involved in our history.

That God would become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

According to Luke's gospel, it was Mary who first learned that God was about to do something big, really big. And that she was going to be intimately involved.

Here's an interesting aside.

While we typically read Mary's story during Advent, our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrate the story about nine months before Christmas, with a special festival, called the Feast of Annunciation.

And every once in a very long while, when the stars align, the Feast of Annunciation falls on the same day as Easter Sunday.

Think for a second about that combination: a celebration of God acting to enter into human history and a celebration of God raising the son that he sent in order to redeem the totality of human history.

The Orthodox Church has named this rare occurrence--*Kyriopascha*. It happens, on average, once every few hundred years.

The last time it occurred was in 1991, which was the same year the Soviet Union fell and millions of Russian Orthodox Christians were freed to worship as they please.

One more interesting fact that you may not have thought about before. It is only Luke who tells Mary's full story.

In Mark, her first and most memorable appearance, is the account, AFTER Jesus has begun his ministry, in which she and her other sons come to take Jesus home, thinking the boy has gone off his rocker (Mark 3:21, 31-35).

She doesn't fare too much better in Matthew who briefly mentions her in chapter one (though he also records her presence at the empty tomb).

John never mentions her by name and Paul makes no mention of her at all.

But in Luke, Mary is center stage.

Which brings us to our gospel text for this morning.

This is the one Sunday we Presbyterians spend anything remotely approaching quality time with her.

Quite unlike our big sister, the Roman Catholic church, which goes to great lengths to honor her image visually—in statues and paintings, in music (think *Ave Maria*), in prayer (the repetitive *Hail Marys*), and even in the names of their houses of worship—*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Grace, Queen of Apostles...* and that's just a few that are here in the Bay Area.

Of course this is no accident. We hold very different “Mariologies.” Believe it or not, that is an actual theological term.

We honor Mary as the mother of Jesus, but run quickly from anything that might smack of idolatry. No idolatry here, right?

And so, rather than setting Mary above and apart, we've tended to focus on how much she might be *like* us—just your average small town girl: devout, yes, but nothing special.

Not wealthy by any means. Engaged and headed toward a typical first century Palestinian life as a young wife and mother.

Maybe a little nondescript, cute (at least in the movies), but nothing out of the ordinary. This allows us, I think, to put ourselves in her shoes. So let's do that.

Imagine you're going about your business: Loading groceries into the car. Mowing the lawn. Doing the dishes. Vacuuming.

All the while daydreaming about your upcoming wedding day, the life you'll make with your new spouse, the kids you'll have, etc., etc., etc.

You're smiling to yourself, lost in thought, when you feel a gentle tap on your shoulder and turn to see a radiant being standing before you.

"What the...?" You catch yourself. You suppose he *could* be part of your daydream, but, when he speaks, it's not any script you would have written:

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

You are absolutely perplexed, probably a little scared (ok, if it were me, a lot scared!).

But then the angel says, "Now, Mary ... don't be afraid. God has noticed you and actually has a plan for you – a bigger plan than you could ever imagine.

"In fact, you're going to be pregnant, not by any earthly being, and bear a son. And you'll name him Jesus and he will be the most amazing person ever born. Pretty neat, right?"

It's a totally shocking and inconceivable message.

To which you reply, "How can this be, since I am still a virgin. No, really. I am!"

"Don't worry, Mary. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and it will be soooo cool. Your child will be the Son of the Most High. Remember nothing is impossible with God."

Now, at this point, what would be running through your mind? Maybe something like, "Uh ... okay. Hey, am I on Candid Camera?"

Then, once you convince yourself that this guy's for real, if it were me, I'd be looking around to make sure there's not someone else in the room that this angel is *actually* speaking to.

Nope. It's just you and him. And so, you take a deep breath, and declare, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

And ... POOF ... the angel disappears. And I guess ... POOF ... you're pregnant. And you're left alone with your own thoughts again and probably wondering what the heck you have just agreed to.

Remember, you're only twelve or thirteen. You're not quite married yet. What are you going to tell your fiancée? The Holy Spirit did it?! Will he ever believe you or trust you again?

Beyond that, it's not going to look good when you start sporting maternity clothes and people do the math.

If Joseph sticks with you, it should be okay. It will just say to the world that you have consummated your marriage.

If not, and the baby is assumed to be someone else's, it's not unheard of for a 1st century Palestinian father or brother to engage in mercy killing to relieve the family from shame. Even in cases of rape.

That being said, I wonder if Mary even had a choice in the matter. Note that the subtitle of our text isn't called "The Request," or "The Invitation," but "*The Annunciation.*"

The text doesn't say that the angel asked Mary how it all sounded to her and whether she would like to try out for the role. He simply told her.

Yes, the angel announced the impending birth and didn't ask Mary for her assent, but I still think there was a choice for Mary.

Mary had the choice to take hold of the unknown life the angel held out to her or to defend herself against it, however she could.

And the truth is, we have a similar choice in our own lives, to say yes or no. Yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me, or no, I will not.

Yes, I will explore a possible unexpected opportunity that has been offered to me, or no, I will not.

It is important to point out that by saying yes, it doesn't necessarily mean that life will be easy, or that we will live happily ever after.

Think about it. I wonder how blessed Mary felt, giving birth on the ground amongst the animals of the manger?

Or as she and Joseph took Jesus and fled for their lives to Egypt?

Or watching her son, the one to whom she gave life and her own flesh, be arrested, beaten, and killed?

Doesn't sound much like favoring or blessing to me.

Mary understands that her favoring and blessing by God are not dependent upon or determined by the circumstances of life.

So often we look at what is going on around us, the circumstances of our lives, and then declare ourselves, or another, to be blessed or not.

Mary, however, teaches us to look and live more deeply; to look beyond the circumstance of life and see God within us.

All because she listened to an angel and had the courage to say "yes!"

We may think this sort of thing doesn't happen anymore. Belief in angels is by no means universal.

And, even though we profess to believe that God is still speaking, it's sometimes easier to imagine that, these days, God's mostly just watching us from on high.

One thing we might want to bear in mind, though, is that the original Greek word for angel—*angelos*—literally means "messenger."

But, must messengers always present themselves as supernatural beings? I don't think so.

There was a great television show on about 10-15 years ago. It was a favorite of mine and was called "Joan of Arcadia," where human characters frequently spoke and acted on God's behalf.

No, they weren't bathed in light or sporting haloes atop their heads.

In "Joan of Arcadia" they frequently posed as a cute, slightly edgy high school boy or the slightly gruff lunch lady in the school cafeteria. About as average as you can get.

How would we even know an angel was speaking to us if we didn't have a TV show pointing them out to us?

That's a very good question. And it leads me to wonder just how many times in our lives we encounter angels and fail to recognize them or their divine messages.

In Hebrews 13:2 it says that we should entertain strangers, cuz they just might be angels!

I have had a number of encounters with angels that, as a result, have radically changed my life.

The first happened in 1993 when an associate pastor of the church I attended suggested I go to seminary.

That was the farthest thing from my mind at the time. I was ALMOST as surprised as Mary must have been. And although he did not have wings and took human form, I know that God worked through him to get to me.

Changed my life? No doubt about it!

Then there was the time in 2001 when I was in Texas and was contemplating where my next call was to be.

I remember staying at my parent's house in Rossmoor, while interviewing with a church in Sacramento and this church.

I was walking around the 9-hole golf course that was part of the complex where they lived and heard the voice of an angel whispering through the trees. God wanted me in San Jose.

But, the Sacramento church was more established. And a church in Denver, that had invited me to be their pastor, was more financially stable.

But God wanted me here. I can honestly say that I have never regretted my decision in the 15 years and two days that I have been here.

And then there was the winter of 2002. I had, by that time, begun my ministry here at STHPC.

I had also left DeLynn back in Texas – on purpose. Although I loved her, how could I handle her three bundles of joy that were part of the package (at the time, aged 8, 11, and 14)?

We talked and I even flew her out here on a couple of occasions. But committing to anything more was not something I had in mind.

DeLynn gave me an ultimatum. Put up or shut up. I had until just after Easter to make up my mind.

I used almost all the time available to me. Going back and forth and back and forth and back and forth ...

Finally, as I was talking to my brother's wife, who is a wise, wise woman (and not for the first time). This time, though, her words took on a

deeper meaning, and this angel, my sister-in-law, who God used to get my attention, spoke words I now do not recall.

However, I do remember, that from that moment on, my decision was clear.

I was scared, I was nervous. But I knew what had to be done. Easter morning, I asked DeLynn to marry me ... albeit from 2000 miles away.

She said yes.

Trust me, that changed my life, forever.

All three decisions have not made my life easier. Anything but! But they were all the right decisions.

And I am forever thankful that God worked through his angels to reach me.

And that I had the courage to say "Yes", not knowing what the future might hold. The decisions were clear ... the future, not so much!

We can either get under the bed when the unexpected presents itself to us, or wring our hands and say this was not what I planned to be doing at this stage of my life.

Or, we can choose to say YES to the new opportunity, letting God write the script.

Mary's unwavering assent and commitment to this risky endeavor, attest both to the content of her character and the depth of her faith.

God saw things in Mary she may not have even been aware she possessed and, up until now, probably hadn't had any opportunity to test.

Before Mary, the world floundered without hope.

Because of Mary's courage, the Messiah came into the world, and of his kingdom there will be no end. In other words, nothing is impossible with God.

Okay, so how does the sectarian carol "Let it Snow" fit into all of this? Not easily, let me tell you. And I thought last week was a challenge!

The carol the choir sang at the beginning of our service begins: "*Oh, the weather outside is frightful...*"

That's life. It isn't easy following God, when everything seems so topsy-turvy.

"But the fire (the Holy Spirit) is so delightful."

When we allow the Holy Spirit in and listen to our heart (God's heart), something amazing can happen.

So, don't worry ... *let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.*

And know that by listening to the angel God sends our way – *we'll be warm all the way home.*

Okay, that's a stretch. But it is also true.

Let me tell you, God is not done interrupting people's lives. Probably not to conceive and bear the Son of God. That's already been done.

But think how many other wonderful things there are that God wants to accomplish through us. So many that you and I couldn't begin to count them all.

And frankly we have been placed in all kinds of places and positions to do those wonderful things.

So, consider this: What angel is out there whispering (or yelling) to get your attention and what might that angel be saying to you?

Because the God of Mary and Jesus is still active, I believe God is still at work in the world ... even through me ... and you.

Therefore, though I do not always understand how and why God is at work, I can still answer:

"Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Amen!