

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25
Psalm 80-1-7, 16-18

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

I stand before you as a preposterous priest, ordained in Advent nine days ago.

Advent is a time of quiet reflection, preparation, and anticipation as we wait for the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ.

But at its heart, Advent is preposterous, beyond all reason and sense.

Why would God, creator of the universe, the sun, the ocean, the stars and the skies, enter the world in such a preposterous way? With complete and utter vulnerability?

The unmarried teenage girl, her fiancé, the filth of the stable. Why did God risk it all for love in such a crazy way?

What would have happened if Mary had said No? If Joseph had said I'm out of here? If the baby got sepsis and died shortly after birth?

Preposterous, right? We assume everything worked according to plan, but the plan made no sense. The angel, the dream, the star. The one who stayed on message was the innkeeper who said there was no room at the inn.

And yet, here we are, two thousand years later. Something worked.

If someone had told me fourteen years ago that I would go to seminary, borrow money I didn't have, survive without a fulltime job for three years and end up

working in a city I never expected to live in doing a job I never expected to have, I'd have "preposterous."

And yet, here we are and I am because God is. Worlds turned upside down and transformed because of a three letter word— YES.

My Yeses spanned a decade or more. I've never known where I was headed. Never. But I've been good at knowing the next right thing. And I had been praying what I have come to call my dangerous prayer: "Let thy will be my will." I prayed it at the Eucharist every week and those six words changed my life.

I wanted to do something different. I knew that. There were no longer any jobs in television that I wanted. But beyond that, I wanted that last years of my professional life to somehow be in service to God from my own deep gratitude for the life I had lived.

But that could have been doing non-profit work in New York City. Being in a pulpit as an ordained priest? Preposterous. I knew that wasn't me.

Yet when a psychologist friend named Michael, (instead of Gabriel), casually said to me at Sunday brunch that if I was interested in pediatric hospice I should go to Union Theological Seminary where there was a program in Psychiatry and Religion. I knew in my bones that was the next right thing.

I went home, Googled Union, to see if I had to take the GREs but I didn't. 3 essays and a \$50 application fee. Nothing scary about that. I banged out the essays, mailed the check and then, was accepted. Yikes. I deferred for a year and then, was fired from my job at CNN. All signs pointed to seminary which was the beginning of everything.

One "Yes" led to another and another, but each was a small step that didn't seem scary at the time. It's like driving at night in a snowstorm. You can only see 18 inches in front of the headlights but that's enough to get you where you're going. I had no idea I was going to a place beyond imagining.

Mary's "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel has always inspired me because of her fearlessness. Her willingness to leave whatever comfort zone she had and veer off the predictable course of her life.

Mary was young – like Samantha Gill or Maggie Richards—and had no idea what she was getting into.

What if she'd said "No?" She also had to explain her pregnancy to Joseph which brings us to Matthew's gospel today.

Mary's brave and bold, "YES" could have been shut down by Joseph. There wasn't much in it for him.

We don't know how Mary broke the news to him. But we do know what it meant 2,000 years ago to be pregnant and unmarried with a child that is not your fiancé's. It meant sure-fire shame and it could also mean being stoned to death.

Matthew writes that Joseph "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." This would have made total sense. But then he had a dream. A dream? We all know how easy it is to wake up in the morning and shake off a dream that makes no sense. No sense. Whatsoever.

But Joseph didn't. He would be the father to the son of God and name him Jesus. Matthew also spells out that there would be no "marital relations" until after Jesus was born which hardly sweetened the deal.

And yet here we are.

God's utter dependence on us, all of us, to realize his kingdom on earth is woven throughout the Advent stories which are so familiar they've carved well worn trails through our hearts. We yearn for the comfort and hope in telling the same story over and over again. Traditions bind us to our families and faith, which is wonderful, yet, dangerous.

Dangerous because a too familiar tale can feel more like a lullaby than a call to action. Advent is both.

“Silent Night, Holy Night,” is the tender lullaby that we sing in the glow of candlelight on Christmas Eve. Its gentleness embraces the babe wrapped in swaddling clothing and lying in the manger. It also embraces our weary souls which are achingly ready yet again to feel the world made brand new.

But we can't forget the call to action inherent in Advent. God is depending on you and me. Can you imagine preparing a manger in your heart to give birth to something new?

In the silence of these holy nights, in the quiet beneath the stars, are you opening your heart to say “Yes” to where God may be calling you? Leading you? Needing you?

In Advent, God shows us God's vulnerability by risking all for love. He needed Mary and Joseph to say “Yes” and depended on them both to bring Jesus into being. Mary insured Jesus' humanity and Joseph, as his protector, knew what every adoptive parent knows, that love is the deepest bond between parent and child.

I stand before you as a preposterous priest because I listened to the whisper of God and kept saying “Yes.”

Listen, wait, hope and pray.

God is calling you to a place beyond imagining.

Trust that once you arrive, you will know beyond doubt or reason, it's exactly where you belong.

AMEN

