



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Saying Yes

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 20, 2020*

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

*Based on Luke 1:26-38, 46-55*

*Let us pray: "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee." Amen.*

Here we are. The last Sunday of Advent, with Christmas on the horizon. When we look back over these four Sundays, what has this Advent season actually meant? Why does it matter? What difference has it made to wait, prepare, anticipate? We know that we have been in an arduous waiting time for much longer than several weeks. This year, we've found ourselves suspended aloft in what seems to be a never-ending dystopian tale. Yet, it is not a tale at all—the repercussions of the pandemic have been and continue to be our reality. We have been unmasked, even while wearing our masks: laid bare, uncovered, exposed. COVID-19 has revealed our vulnerabilities, our weaknesses, our inequities, our prejudices, and we long for release. We have all been waiting for deliverance, for new birth.

And so, an angel arrives. The Annunciation in Luke's Gospel narrates the visit of the archangel Gabriel, who arrives with very important news for Mary. The word *annunciation* comes to the English language from the Latin *adnuntiare*, to proclaim. Its root word is *nuntius*, or messenger. Mary was visited by a messenger. This messenger angel arrives with an astonishing proclamation to a marginalized woman in a podunk town located in the hilly terrain of Galilee.

But before Mary becomes pregnant with the Word, the Logos, the Son of God in her womb, scripture tells us that Mary becomes pregnant with perplexity. Well, no kidding. That sounds about right. We understand that well. We get that. Perplexity has been a hallmark of our response to this pandemic year. We've all asked Mary's question, "How can this be?" in reflecting upon the havoc wreaked by the virus. "Why is this happening?" "Why me?" "Why now?" Mary expresses those feelings for our sake as well as for her own.

But then an astonishing event occurs. You would think that the appearance of an angel speaking prophecy in your presence would be as startling as it could get. But, turns out it's not. Speaking angels are quite remarkable, but that is not the most striking part of this story.

Even more startling than the appearance of the angel and his message, is the fact that Mary says yes. "Here am I, Lord. Thy love be done." Like the prophets of old, she commits herself to embrace the unexpected, much like we continue to do as we navigate the mercurial terrain of this pandemic. She entrusts herself to imagine a future beyond her present reality, just as we constantly tell ourselves that 2021 just has to be better. She embraces an identity of which she has little knowledge or understanding, but to which she is willing to commit. Just as we had no idea what was to come when we stepped into the

beginning of 2020, Mary has no idea that she is stepping into the unknown full of danger, hope, possibilities, and pain.

In the Madeleine L'Engle poem "Mary Speaks," Mary says to her son:

O you who bear the pain of the whole earth, I bore you.  
O you whose tears give human tears their worth, I laughed with you.  
You, who, when your hem is touched, give power, I nourished you.  
Who turns the day to night in this dark hour, light comes from you.<sup>1</sup>

In the Spanish language, the words used to describe a pregnant mother giving birth are rendered as *dar a luz* or *dar a la luz*, the literal translation being "to give to light" or "to give to the light." Another luminous word in Spanish is *alumbrando*, literally, "shedding light or illuminating," and can also describe a woman who is in the process of giving birth and delivering her baby. Even before Mary physically "gives to the light" the incarnate Son of God, the Light of the World—even before she laughs with him, nourishes him, or carries him in her womb—she gives birth to the light of belief, her belief in God's words through the angel messenger. Nine months before any contractions convulse through her body, she gives birth to her reliance, faith and trust in God.

*Ella da a luz*—she gives birth—to God's words, and they all come tumbling out in song as she proclaims the *Magnificat* in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth. We heard it so beautifully sung this morning: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!" Mary just couldn't help it. Out of her mouth came what could not remain contained within her body.

Have you ever had that experience? That experience of feeling as though you were ready to burst at the seams, because waiting within your being were words of such great import that you felt if you did not say them, you would just explode? Mary could say yes because her soul felt it had no other recourse but to give birth to the declaration of God's greatness. She could say yes because God rendered her humility powerful and dignified, not weak and marginal. She could say yes because she wanted to use her newfound agency to shed light upon God's holy name. She could say yes because she believed in the strength of God's arm. She could say yes because she believed in a God who could lift up the lowly. She could say yes because she believed in God's promise of mercy. Her saying yes had little to do with her, but everything to do with God.

Much later on in the Gospel of Luke (11:27-28), we see Jesus teaching a crowd of people when a woman calls out to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!" This is her poetic way of saying, "How doggone lucky it is to be your mother, Jesus!" She thinks it would be wonderful to be Jesus' mom because Jesus is a great man and the worth of women was (and still often is) determined by the quality of sons they produce.

Yet Jesus rejects such unfair (and rather sexist) ideology, and instead replies, "Yes, but even more blessed are all who hear the Word of God and put it into practice." He is saying, in effect, "My mother *is* blessed, but not because her womb bore me or because she nursed me! She is blessed because she enfolded and embraced the words of God faithfully within her body. She believed God's word spoken to her and in turn gave birth to her belief, even before she birthed me." Mary birthed Jesus, the Word made flesh. Yet even before she gives birth to her son, Mary enfleshes the word of God within herself with one single word: Yes. "Yes, God, I'm here. Thy love be done."

Mary—the one who embodies our Advent feelings—gives voice to our Advent expectancy and shouts aloud our Advent response. We are always tempted to put Mary on a pedestal and say, "Oh, she was a

different sort of human being altogether!” But Mary was no different. Mary did not corner the market or exercise a monopoly on the ability to say yes. We, too, can say yes to God.

Mary leads the way, inviting us to follow her pattern. She becomes our witness, our testifier, guiding us forward, first into her perplexity, then into her concern, then ushering us into her commitment, and then serenading us with her Advent crescendo of song in praise of God. And this brings us to the point where we need to be—ready to welcome the Christ child into the world.

Mary said yes—not impetuously or indiscriminately or thoughtlessly—but uttered her consent based upon the vision of what she hoped for, and the proof of what she could not yet see, believing and trusting the God who spoke to her. In that moment, did she know where it would all lead? No. We often entangle ourselves with our own rationalizations and human logic. Yet Madeleine L’Engle again gives us something important to ponder when she writes, “had Mary been filled with reason / there’d have been no room for the child.”<sup>2</sup>

Living in a world that is unsteady, how will we make room for, give light to, allow our soul to give birth to our yes to God this Christmas, and as we enter this new year? As we cry out for release from the present stronghold of this pandemic, we remember Mary’s release through her yes. Her yes was her deliverance, even before she delivered the Christ child, and we can embrace it to be ours as well.

It is something so astounding, when you think of it: the realization that an infinite, unbounded and unconstrained God would wait for human consent, for a human to say “yes” before acting. As we have waited for God this Advent, the God of Advent also waits for us.

And so, the poetry of Madeleine L’Engle brings our Advent season of waiting to a close when she writes,

We cannot wait till the world is sane  
to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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1. “Mary Speaks” by Madeleine L’Engle, from *The Ordering of Love—New & Collected Poems of Madeleine L’Engle* (2009), p. 267.

2. “After Annunciation” by Madeleine L’Engle, from *The Ordering of Love—New & Collected Poems of Madeleine L’Engle* (2009), p. 153.

3. “First Coming” by Madeleine L’Engle, from *The Ordering of Love—New & Collected Poems of Madeleine L’Engle* (2009), p. 242.