**Isaiah 9:2-7**

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

**Luke 1:46-56**

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Luke 1:26-38**

26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

28And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

30The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

34Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

35The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

37For nothing will be impossible with God.”

38Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

**SERMON – What will you say?**

Imagine…. You are going about your everyday business, in your everyday life, in your ordinary home, far from anything that is important. And a creature appears, with the afterglow of divine light fresh on his robes, standing before you. And what you hear is “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.” Imagine your reaction…. What do you do? What do you say?

This is the story of Mary… Mary was not expecting visitors, and she certainly was not expecting a visit from the Angel Gabriel. Mary is a teenage girl, a poor peasant, in an insignificant town in a backwater province, filled with nobodies. Mary, a virgin, with her life moving along the quiet, ordinary path of an arranged marriage to a carpenter. Mary, who was never described as holy or sinless, immune from the vicissitudes of human life. She was fallible and human – “every person”. There was nothing about her that marked her as particularly worthy of God’s notice or favor.

But then, the Bible is filled with God showing up in the most unlooked-for places and the unlikeliest of people.  People have encountered the God of wonder in bushes that burn, donkeys that talk, raging whirlwinds, pillars of fire, and under starry night skies, or in the whisper of silence. God has a way of amazing us on the tops of mountains, at wells in the noonday sun, and strangers bearing gifts. No matter how often we look for God in the familiar places, God will somehow be revealed in the unexpected, the unlooked-for, and the unpredicted. In the face of the child, smiling at you; the elderly person waning away in a nursing home; the refugee on a beach, trying to get away from the horror; or the homeless teen that just could not face the abuse anymore.

And most of the time it is to ordinary people – people like Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds, Moses, Jacob and Abraham. People like me and you. And just in case you would say, “but they did great things”; yes, they did, but that was only after they said “yes”.

“Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God.” Do not be afraid? How can Mary not be afraid? Angels don’t come to Nazareth and they most certainly don’t come to poor peasant girls like Mary. God doesn’t find favor with the likes of her. The angel must be mistaken. Perhaps he is lost. Maybe he is looking for a different Mary. But he keeps talking. “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Surprise! How can this be? And yet here is the angel, speaking of ancestors, and throne and kingdoms. It makes no sense. Why choose a barely engaged teenager to carry God’s son? But then, why not?

To say Mary is perplexed by her angelic visitor is an understatement. “How can this be?” Mary responds. She wanted to know exactly what was going to happen and to make sense out of something that did not make any sense: that God has decided to render himself to flesh and blood but that he needed her help, needed her surrender as well in order to make possible his own.

I believe there might have been some other questions: “Will Joseph still marry me?, will my parents disown me or still love me? Will I be stoned to death? Will my friends still stand with me? Who will help me in the times to come? And rightly so…

In Mary’s case, the angel’s statement “The Lord is with you” meant “The Lord has a really difficult task for you.” I don’t think Mary really knew that she was signing up for all the difficulty that would come her way. Her life would be incredibly challenging, beginning with ugly talk about her untimely pregnancy and illegitimate child. She is warned that, as a child, Jesus will bring judgment and division, and that a sword will pierce her own soul, too—she too will know the pain of rejection and division. She will be forced to flee her home and live as a refugee. She bears the gossip and stigma of speculations about Jesus’s mental sanity as he begins his ministry. Ultimately, she will see her son executed as a criminal, dying on a cross. But she was also told that the Lord was with her, and maybe, maybe that was enough.

I’ve often wondered where a regular teenage girl got the courage to say “Yes”. Was she so familiar with God and his promises, the knowledge of a Messiah to come, that she could just in faith say “yes”? Nothing about her life suggested that she would play an integral role in God’s plan for salvation. But God invites ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Maybe only a few people can live up to an “ideal,” but everyone can make a choice. A choice to let your life be given over to the grace of God, and a new adventure; to be part of God’s plan of redemption; or the choice to rail against it, be mad about what happens to you, and try to block every attempt at a positive outcome. Mary’s courage, her choice to say yes to God’s call, opened her to a life utterly illumined by God’s grace. And this is what, in some mysterious way, makes Mary's story our own, or at least it makes her story something we can understand much better.

Aren’t there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives? Moments when roads of light open from darkness in a person? Moments when God invites us to partner in God’s mission of redemption, to partner in building up God’s kingdom? Moments when, even when we are not sure why, we just have to say “yes”. But then, don’t we more often turn away from those moments in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief? Ordinary lives continue. But I wonder: is ordinary life not the place where we see the greatest courage at work?

I think of the people who embody the courage of Mary, who embody the hope and trust in God’s promise of redemption despite the everyday suffering of life that would seem to belay that promise. I think of the survivor of sexual assault who refuses to give in to despair at the horror she has lived through and instead asks what she can do to minister to others. I think of the young adult who lives her days lobbying for refugee relief and support, despite overwhelming odds against her cause. I think of the wives, husbands, sons, and daughters who care every day for loved ones experiencing illness and disease, for whom there is no cure in sight, who give the gift of dignity at the end of life. I think of the social workers, and teachers, and guardians *ad litem* who give their time, effort, and energy to care and advocate for children who have no one who cares for them. I think of all those who offer their time and ability to take care of the “least of these.” I think of the people in our congregations who are willing to risk entering into relationship with someone who is completely unlike them, in order to share the love of God. I think of ordinary people who are willing to obey God’s claim on their lives, who say yes to the seemingly impossible, who open themselves to a life utterly illumined and undergirded by God’s own grace.

Mary’s uniqueness is not her perfection, but her willingness to say “yes” to the unexpected and apparently impossible; saying “yes” to a God who is doing something at least as shocking and offensive as it is miraculous. She aligns her will with God’s will and miracles occur. For with God, nothing is impossible. What we deem impossible may be part of God’s deeper reality breaking forth in our lives.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, on this Christmas Eve, Mary reminds us of what it looks like and what it sounds like when God shows up in your life -- unannounced, unexpected, and unplanned. As Gabriel appeared to Mary we realize how God comes to us. Such intrusions into our ordered and ordinary life catch us off guard. Still such intrusions into life always demand a response from us. What will you say? What will be your reaction?

When God breaks into our world, into our lives, our response needs to be Mary’s -- who says, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.” Because when God intrudes, how can you not? I mean, what else is there to say? God intrudes when God must. God intervenes when God’s Kingdom is in peril. God interrupts injustice. God interferes when power oppresses. And so we say, “Here we are.”

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the right response, is the Mary response, when God calls you to stand up for the vulnerable.

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God calls you to fight for the poor, the hungry and the unjustly incarcerated; when you are called to stand up against injustice and oppression.

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God calls you to be fierce against bills and laws that are passed which further increase the gap between the haves and have-nots.

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God calls you to insist that diversity is a hallmark of the Kingdom of God; that the walls of racism and ethnicism need to be broken down.

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God calls you to affirm those persons who give witness to evidence-based experience of God working in their lives.

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God calls you to call out discrimination against immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ and other minority groups.

"Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” is the Mary response when God asks you to care for God’s creation, as the environment cries out against those who eschew science-based evidence.

And so, the list continues and keeps on growing. And God keeps on showing up in those places, in those faces, where we least expect it. And yes, we have a choice. But I think it is a true a miracle when someone says to God, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” It comes down to this: when God is with you, it’s risky business; when you accept the risky business to which God calls you, God is with you. What will you say?