

WELCOME – LOIS HARDER

Good morning! The first semester of school is done! We're heading into Christmas week and this morning Pastor Caleb will help us to think more about Mary and what we can learn from her about humble discipleship – practicing love on our faith journey.

Thanks to the Elbiata singers, their director, Braden Unruh and accomp., Marcia B.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION AND SERVICE:

Thursday is Christmas Eve and although it's a huge loss not to be together for our traditional candlelight service, we're looking forward to the recorded program that Renae Schmidt Peters and Travis Duerksen have created with the children. A link will be sent to you from the church office for you to watch anytime between 4pm and midnight on Thursday.

Next Sunday we're hoping to have an outdoor service! It will be a time to bundle up and sing some Christmas carols together with very brief scripture readings in between – an outdoor "Lessons and Carols" service, since we've not been able to sing together for such a long time. Of course, there's always the option of remaining in your car and tuning in on the FM signal. The forecast looks a bit chilly right now, but bring your mug of hot chocolate or coffee and come out and sing! We'll begin at 11:00 rather than 10:00, trying to move towards a warmer part of the day.

Invocation – God and maker of all, to redeem the world you chose the most unsuspecting of women to mother your Son. Be present with us now in this time of worship, that we may be attentive to your choices for us – the most unsuspecting of people. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Gracious God, we give you thanks this morning for music, for bells and voices, for poetry and art, for dreams and visions, for stars and planets that align, for ways we can know your presence with us that go beyond words and analysis and knowing with our intellect. We thank you this morning, especially, for the story of Mary and of her ways of knowing that led her to be open to YOUR ways of moving in this world, mysteriously, unexpectedly. Open our ears and our hearts, O God, to the message you have for us this morning and in the coming days and weeks.

We thank you, God for your gift of healing. We think of those who are healing from medical procedures, those who are healing and recuperating from covid or other illnesses. We are grateful that the covid vaccine has finally begun to be made available; we pray that it will be given quickly and equitably to all who need it most urgently. We ask for your healing for those who are anticipating medical tests or procedures, who may be anxious or scared about medical issues they're facing. We ask for your continued healing for those in the midst of treatment – for Steve Banman and Gene Hastings and for others whose names and needs you know.

We thank you for teachers and all the support staff at schools and for students who have successfully completed this first semester of the school year under covid conditions. We thank you for their hard work, their commitment and their creativity. We ask, God, for rest and relaxation now during this break, that they may all find some refreshment and renewed energy for the second semester. We pray for those who continue to work on the front lines in health care. Give strength and perseverance for the weeks and months to come.

God, in this strange and difficult time of celebrating Jesus' birth in the midst of a global pandemic we acknowledge the disappointment and loss that we feel from plans and gatherings with loved ones that cannot happen. The tidings of comfort and joy are needed in deeper and different ways this year. Help us to dig deeper, to find comfort in helping others and joy in being generous. Be with those who are teetering on the edge or who've already been pushed over the edge of financial desperation, those who've been evicted from their homes because they can't pay their rent or mortgage, those who don't have enough to feed their families or pay their bills. Your plan, God, was for all of your creation to have enough, enough to live and thrive, to be well and whole. Grant your people wisdom and courage to know when we have enough and to be generous with the rest.

Be with those who are remembering and grieving the loss of loved ones during this time. We pray for the family of Archie Wiebe. We pray for those in our community who may be grieving, those in our nation and around the world – send your Spirit of comfort, of peace.

OFFERING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

Our God,

We want to be able to respond with a "yes" like we will see in the story of Mary. Our offerings and Tithes are a small way to let go, to release our hold on what we have worked for, and give back.

We pray that you would both inspire and bless our giving in every sense, especially in stressful times. Use the ministries of Alexanderwohl as a signpost of your mission here on earth. Amen

MONOLOGUE – “THE BIRTH OF JESUS REVEALED” – DJ FREEMAN

ABRIDGED FROM “ON THE ROAD,” *LEADER* MAGAZINE, FALL 2020, ONLINE WORSHIP RESOURCES
When I was young, my mother used to tell me a story about a rabbi who had a dream. In the dream, he was able to see where the selfish and the givers end up. First, he saw where the selfish people were taken. He couldn't believe his eyes! It was a big, beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that no one was eating. He wondered why until he realized that a three-foot-long spoon was strapped to each of their arms. Without the ability to bend their elbows, they could not eat. So each one sat hungry at a table filled with food.

The rabbi was then led out of this room to the place where givers go. He couldn't understand what he was seeing! It was also a beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Just as in the other hall, a three-foot spoon was strapped to each person's arm, but there was a difference. Here the people sitting at the tables looked happy. He saw that in this room, each arm stretched out to reach the mouth of another. Here no one went hungry, because everyone could eat.

My mother told me givers are blessed by giving, but selfish people only understand taking, no matter where they live or how much they have. She said learning this lesson would serve me well in my service to God.

My husband Joseph and I both grew up in Nazareth. I always felt safe and secure there. Joseph does not talk much, but his mind is always working. He is conscientious, faithful, and gentle. And Joseph is a giver. I know this because in the sixth month of our betrothal something happened that changed our lives. Joseph was by my side every step of the way.

It was spring, a time when most of the rains had passed and the ground was green. It had been a busy day, and I was hunting for some privacy in the cooler evening air. I was preoccupied, thinking of other things, when a voice broke the silence.

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

I turned around to see who called to me. No one was there, but I noticed that the light around me seemed to be shining brighter. The sun had already set, so it should have been darker. I was confused. I closed my eyes and stumbled back a step. The voice came again.

"Don't be afraid, Mary."

I opened my eyes. No one was there, but the light seemed even brighter. I took a small step forward, looking into the light in front of me. Slowly, the light shifted, and a figure began to form, growing in size as if walking toward me from a long distance. When the figure reached me, I felt dwarfed by its presence. When I finally gained enough courage to look up, I found an attentive face looking at me. In the same voice I had heard before, the figure said, "Mary."

Then, unbelievably, an even stranger thing happened. From some place deep inside, I understood that this illuminated figure was an angel.

The angel said, "Do not be afraid," and I suddenly realized I no longer was. The angel told me I had found favor with God. I had been chosen to conceive and bear a son.

The angel said, "You shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever! His kingdom will never end."

I could feel my face growing warm and the blood pounding in my ears, but I did my best not to let the chaotic feelings rolling inside me sway me from my spot.

“I don’t think this is possible. I am a virgin. I am engaged but am not yet married.”

The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child to be born will be called holy, for he will be the Son of God. Go and visit your kinswoman Elizabeth. She is old and has been called barren, yet she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. See for yourself that nothing is impossible with God.”

I bowed my head, searching for how to respond, and that’s when it happened . . . the revelation. In that moment, I realized I am also a giver. I whispered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel was gone, only a cloud blowing over the plains.

MAY IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 1:26-38

Mary was a giver. She said yes.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to her to announce that she would be the mother of God’s Son, she agreed. We pretty easily skip over that crucial moment. Maybe we assume that Mary didn’t really have a choice.

Maybe we take Mary a little for granted. Mary placed herself in the position to allow God’s plan of salvation to unfold. We don’t have the rest of the Christmas story without Mary.

Mary said: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary accepted perhaps the most incredible invitation a person could receive – to feel a human life growing in her womb, as countless women have, with the humbling knowledge that the child would be the Messiah, who would embody the very saving presence of God with God’s people.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke recognize that as a full human being, Jesus was born into the world as a little baby as we all were. The mystery of birth is surprising enough if you have witnessed it first hand or had the privilege of holding a newborn child.

It’s a whole other element to comprehend our faith tradition’s audacious claim that this is when the Word of God became flesh and lived among us.

Did Mary really understand what she was saying yes to?

I can think of a few “yesses” in my life that weren’t agreeing to something I could completely know what to expect.

Making the choice to go for both of my stints in Latin America, making the choice to go to seminary, making the choice to come to Alexanderwohl and move our expanding family to Kansas. Moreover, making the choice to make Beth my life-partner and open the possibility of becoming a father.

I couldn't know, don't know what all I was signing up for with these "yeses." Nor did Mary. Let's touch on a couple of details of this familiar story that I believe are important.

One is this word "favor" or "favored." The angel Gabriel calls Mary the "favored one" and assures her that she has found favor with God.

If you do much Bible reading, you may have caught on that "finding favor" is a common biblical expression. Both Abraham and the judge Gideon cautiously addressed the angels that visited them by saying, "if your servant has found favor in your eyes..."

It's the thing that a social inferior would say to a social superior. It's like if you had a billionaire friend and you dared to say: "If I've found favor in your sight, I'd enjoy a free trip of a life-time into outer space." Favor is special kindness that is unexpected.

More importantly, "favor" is the exact same word in the Bible as "grace." Mary is a recipient of God's grace.

I will make the point later on that Mary is precisely the kind of person who was not considered important, would be completely forgotten except for this extraordinary grace of God to become the mother of Christ.

The angel tells her: this Jesus will be great. He will inherit the throne of David. Mary responds with wonderment: How can this be?

Mary's question is different than Zechariah's earlier in the chapter. The humble priest Zechariah asked, "how will I know that this is so? How can I be sure?" Because Zechariah wished for certainty, the angel took away his voice, made him mute for a time.

According to Kathleen Norris, "Mary contents herself with wisdom.... Mary's "How can this be?" is a simpler response than Zechariah's, and also more profound. She does not lose her voice but finds it."¹

Mary humbly submitted to the mystery of what God was doing.

ARE WE LIKE OR UNLIKE MARY?

Mary is a yet another powerful example in the Bible of an ordinary person of humble background being called to a role of immense importance in God's plan of salvation.

The usual take-away is that if God can call ordinary people like Mary, God can have a claim on your life as well. I wholeheartedly affirm that, but don't want that to obscure the ways that we are different than Mary.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books: 1999), 74, 75, 76–77. Accessed at <https://cac.org/receiving-the-gift-2020-12-08/>

We're different not because we are too ordinary, but because we've been conditioned by our culture and our relative privilege to believe that we are really important. Our culture gives us the ideal of being self-sufficient individuals and the ideal of having significant accomplishments to our names – maybe owning a successful business or achieving a high level of education. Our culture tells us to strive to be *important*.

Some of us more than others – but it's a theme that runs through our lives and blocks us from grasping what an unimportant nobody Mary really was.

It's too tempting to over-identify with biblical characters, and then misunderstand the story by thinking they were like us or that we are like them. After all, we might be more like the occupying Romans or the rich landlords of Jesus' day than the humble peasants Jesus spent most of his time with.

There are specific ways we are *not* Mary. None of us (at least who I imagine is listening) has really been in her position.

She is a teenager in a world dominated by men. Her song in the following verses is surprising, because most of the Marys of her day had no voice. She probably barely knew Joseph, much less was in love. Whether she consented or not, the marriage was an arrangement between their two families.

She expected a servant's life in her patriarchal culture. Her job would be to bear children for her husband and manage the household.

The offering of two turtledoves that Mary and Joseph give in the next chapter suggest that they were relatively poor by first century standards, which makes them almost destitute by our standards.

God's special call for Mary wouldn't exactly give her a fairy princess' life. Getting pregnant out of wedlock surely put her through a scandal full of shame. And some years later, she would mourn at the foot of the cross of her executed son.

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

A simple statement that was a giant leap of a faith. An uncharted adventure of allowing the mystery of God to be birthed in her life.

If we put ourselves into this at all, it's the call for each of us to say the same thing to God. To embrace the adventure, the unknown, and the humility of letting go of being in charge of our own lives.

SAYING YES TO GOD AS LETTING GO OF THE NEED TO BE IMPORTANT

There are two basic points I want to make:

- Saying yes to God is letting go of the need to be important
- Saying yes to God is letting go of needing to be in control

Albert Nolan writes: Jesus was uncompromising in his belief that all human beings were equal in dignity and worth. He treated the blind, the lame and the [sick], the outcasts and beggars with as much respect as that given to those of high rank and status. He refused to consider women and children unimportant or inferior.”²

Fundamental to the gospel is that God chooses those who the world calls “unimportant.” I wonder who are the “unimportant” people that Jesus would be spending time with today? Maybe...

- Undocumented immigrants, many of whom are essential workers, working in agriculture and meat processing plants, suffering disproportionate rates of COVID infection.
- Homeless and addicts who try to drown their pain.
- Those struggling to put together enough income to get by.
- People living in subsidized housing or in very humble homes in disrepair
- Folks in prison, including those serving ridiculously long sentences for non-violent offences.
- Maybe it would be those living in communities deeply impacted by racism, whose sons see no hope for their future and fear being shot.
- He might invite himself for dinner with millionaires and billionaires if they were planning on giving away most of their wealth.

Letting go of the need to be important is hard when we’ve been conditioned from a young age to strive to be important. It takes a life-time of transformation, and likewise letting go of the need to be in control.

SAYING YES TO GOD AS LETTING GO OF CONTROL

We’ve already seen how Mary’s “yes,” gave her extraordinary blessing as well as pain. It had nothing to do with our usual goals of gaining wealth, having good health, and being in respectable social standing. That’s not what being “favored” meant.

Mary said “let it be” without knowing where it would lead her.

Mary accepted the mystery of what God was doing in her life. We cling too tightly with being in control of our lives.

We are either obsessed with maintaining the belief that we are doing everything right in life -- a life that we are proud to announce in Christmas letters to family and friends as we give the update on what we've done in the last year.

Or we have the nagging thoughts -- maybe secretly -- saying, "this is not how I thought my life would be," or "I can't get over the way this or that person hurt me" or "I didn't sign up for this

² Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Orbis Books: 2006), 52. Accessed at <https://cac.org/taking-the-lower-place-2020-12-15/>

diagnosis, this job loss, this disappointment." In a pandemic year, these feelings can be all the more intense.

What better time to let go of the need to control things than the worst point of a pandemic, at the end of a crazy year that's left many of us feeling bewildered, exhausted, or simply numb to what you hear on the news?

SAYING YES TO THE PRESENT REALITY

I can't say what exactly the "yes" is that God is calling any of you to. After all, I'm still discovering that for myself.

But we might start with saying yes to the present reality that we're living in. That might mean something in your life that's difficult to deal with, or the challenge we all share right now of continuing through more months of this pandemic.

We end up more stuck when we fight or flee from what's out of our control instead of dealing with the challenge creatively.

As far as creativity: what are ideas that we haven't thought of to get us through this time; I would love to hear stories -- what have you done to stay connected with families while also striving to stay safe and avoid spreading the virus?

As far as some basic practices, a couple of you have commented on needed to take a break from the news – that may be more important than ever. Find ways to care for your spirit, whether that's taking a walk in the chilled air, sitting down with a good book, or taking in the smiles of children in your life.

It's important to give time and space to grieving whatever feels like a loss, and particularly the tragedy that is around us, so that we don't simply become numb to it.

Yet that grief or lament can also wait until after we give Christmas a good celebrating. This year in particular is an opportunity to find joy not simply in the things we are accustomed to doing this time of year, but in the Christmas story itself. Celebrate and feast in a way that contradicts what the reality seems to be. If you are celebrating Christmas with just the people you live with, don't let that be reason to not make the meals extra special.

Everything is not OK, but we are OK. We are OK, because we are God's beloved and invited people, as we make the love of God and the unearned favor of God the ground on which we stand.

Let's rejoice and let's allow the mystery of God's love and calling to touch even us.

BENEDICTION – PASTOR LOIS

With the joy that was Mary's, may our souls magnify the Lord, and our bodies be the means through which God continues the mighty work of salvation for which Christ came. Amen.