

December 24, 2023
Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

II Samuel 7:1-16

Canticle 15

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

In the Name of God, whose coming we await. Amen.

Many years ago, I came up with what I think is the perfect word for this Fourth Sunday of Advent: “Yikes!” Just think about it for a moment...

- Yikes! I can’t believe Christmas is only eight hours away.
- Yikes! I invited *how* many people to dinner?
- Yikes! But I *want* to build God a temple!
- Yikes! I’m going to have a *what*?

Yikes, indeed. So much for the best laid plans of mice and men, of kings and virgins, of you and me.

As we’ve moved through Advent, our attention has shifted from the thundering of prophets to the anticipation of the Savior’s birth – from penitence to preparation. Today, we are fully in preparation mode. But, as every child discovers on Christmas morning, we don’t always get what we want.

In today’s reading from II Samuel, we hear about King David’s grand plans. He is now set up as king in Jerusalem, and peace reigns. “Since I now have a great big house, well, a palace really,” David tells Nathan, “God should have a house, too. Let’s build God a temple, something better than that tattered old tent.”

But, as often seems to be the case, God insists that God is in charge, and God has other plans. Yikes! By night, God tells Nathan that the house *God* plans for David is neither palace nor temple, but an everlasting dynasty. A family. The House and Lineage of David. The Tree of Jesse, of which Jesus will be the chief Branch.

Now let’s fast-forward from King David in the capital city of Jerusalem, to the young girl Miriam in Nazareth, in the Galilee, way up north in the provinces. One day, perhaps in the midst of planning her marriage feast, Miriam is greeted by the angel Gabriel – an archangel, mind you, not an ordinary TV angel with a little glow around the head.

Hail, favored one! Gabriel begins. “And Mary was much perplexed.” Perplexed? Please! I imagine Mary uttered the Aramaic equivalent of, “yikes!”

Gabriel tries to reassure her. *Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.* This was supposed to help? Then all this talk of a child, her child, the Son of God, finally fulfilling God’s promise to David. The miracle isn’t that she said yes, the miracle is that she didn’t run away!

Now, there are two hurdles for us as we hear this story. The first is that we all know the plot and the script. It’s important to step back and remember that Luke is not reporting on an isolated diary entry from March 25th. He is, instead, distilling the mystery of salvation. In this brief, familiar account, Luke summarizes the ongoing and long-term processes of revelation, call, pondering, and response.

The second hurdle is that many of us were raised to see Mary as our model for “holy resignation” to the will of God. I know it argues against tradition, but simple resignation is too simple, it’s a cop-out, and not part of the authentic life in God that we’re constantly invited to share. Mary is a model for us because she actively *cooperated* with God’s call to and for her.

Let’s think about cooperation for a moment. It seems a given that God does not redeem us in a vacuum. Instead, God prefers, if not requires, human participation in the work of the Kingdom. Still, what we think God might (or should) do is often not what God decides to do. After all, God chose Abel over Cain; Jacob over Esau; David over Saul; Nazareth and Bethlehem over Jerusalem.

Ours, after all, is the God who, time after time, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away, who casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. “How can this be?” we cry, “none of this makes any sense to us.” The poet Madeleine L’Engle offers us these lines:

This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there’d have been no room for the child.¹

Of course, you and I don’t live in Nazareth. And I’m guessing that not many of us have ever entertained an angel (arch- or otherwise) in our front rooms. So, how does God call us? I want to tell you two stories. Some of you may have heard them before, but they seem appropriate today. I think of stories like picture postcards. The events were important in the moment (that’s why I bought the postcard), but when I open the

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, “After Annunciation” from *A Cry Like a Bell: Poems* (2000, Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL), p. 58.

box and look through them today, they take on deeper meanings. These two particular postcards are about looking and listening.

In the late 1990s, my former partner and I spent the last four days of an Italian vacation in Venice, a beautiful, but surreal city. In all of Venice there is hardly a street longer than the driveway that passes between the church and the Perkins House. In those days before GPS, getting around required constant looking at a map. It was impossible not to get lost. What we discovered on more than one frustrating occasion was that we had passed by our desired location and found it only when we turned to go back – there it was. It didn't look quite the way we thought it might, but there it was.

How often do we continue to trudge in the same direction because it's *our* plan, or we're blindly following a map and don't like to ask for directions? If we never lift up our heads to look around, we will miss the fact that the Kingdom of God is a surprise, and that where we need to be at that moment is not somewhere else, but here – just facing another direction.

The second postcard, which seems to be stuck to the first, is about listening. Some of us spend hours a week in prayer, listening for God. My own experience is that God's voice comes less often in the silence than out of the mouths of friends and colleagues – sometimes even strangers.

About thirty years ago, the rector of the church where I was the musician "casually" asked me if I would be interested in preaching sometime. My response was an immediate NO! "That's not for me," I said, "I'm the organist, that's not what I do. Thank you, but no." Of course, it was my own version of "Yikes!"

I told some friends about the invitation and my reaction, and I believe that God spoke through them. "Why don't you give it a try – if it's not for you, you'll know." They, and others, helped me navigate from "yikes" to, "maybe" to, eventually, "yes." That yes continues to transform my life; it has forever changed the way I look and listen.

I offer you these stories not because I am special, or because I am a priest, but because we all have such stories in our lives. If you sit with your own box of postcards, or selfies, or wherever it is that you keep your stories, and look among them for turning points, those places where you changed direction, or heard something differently, you will see where and how you have been transformed by the call of God in your life.

I can see some of you thinking, "he can't possibly mean me. I'm just plain old me." Dear ones, beyond looking and listening, the hardest part in the work of transformation is accepting the fact that God has already chosen you, already favors you. We say that all things are possible with God, but we don't dare to believe it. How many of you understand that God is waiting for you to say "Let it be to me according to your word," just as God waited for Mary to say it?

Martin Luther, who was particularly fond of this time of year wrote, "This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that Christ is the son of a virgin, nor even the son of God, as to believe that this Son of God is ours. ... This is the word of the prophet: *Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.*"²

In the end, as it was with Mary, the choice is ours. The automatic "Yikes!" is part of the human condition, but that same human condition has already been restored by the Child sleeping on Mary's lap.

When God's angel tells you that you are chosen and favored, make a leap of faith, and believe it. Permit yourself a "yikes!" Then listen again – and say "yes." Say yes to the transforming power of the long-expected One, the One who will release us from our fears and our sins, the One in whom we find our rest. O come, O come, Emmanuel. Amen.

² Roland H. Bainton, ed., "The Martin Luther Christmas Book" (1977: Fortress Press), pp. 22-23.