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Advent 4B
Peace, Seattle
December 18, 2011
Luke 1:26-55

God of Spirit and Flesh, visit us this season with your creative and powerful presence. Allow us, O Lord, to see the ways both great and small, which you take risks for our sake and the sake of the world. And, like Mary, grant us such grace that we, too, may say "YES" to the surprises you have in store. We ask this in the name of him who was given life in the womb of Mary, Emmanuel, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

MARY SAID "YES"

As I was getting my presentation ready for the Christmas traditions event last Saturday, I found myself hunting through old photo albums and through my mother's biography looking for pictures from my childhood years.

Whenever I open my mother's autobiography I am supremely grateful for what she undertook in that project. The meatiest volume—which is the second one—covers the first 25 years of her marriage to Dad, and the births and early years of each of us eight kids.

When I first read my story through my mother's eyes, some of the plot lines were well known—I'd heard them for years. But some were new to me—or at least I couldn't remember having heard them before.

One of those stories unfolded in 1956. My folks were living in **Whitefish**, **Montana**, where Dad was serving his first pastoral call, a two-point parish—American Lutheran Church in town, and a small country parish in Stillwater.

Though Mom had a 2 yr old and an 8 month old at home, and was newly pregnant with baby #3, she always found the energy to participate when she could in church programs. This time, she over did it.

It was Friday, June 8th, my parents anniversary, and the final day of the two-week VBS program at the Stillwater parish. Mom was sitting with her class eating ice cream cups on the lawn, when suddenly a strange and alarming feeling rushed through her, and she knew instantly she was in danger of losing the baby.

Rushing home, she yelled for the babysitter to call the doctor while she slipped into bed. The doctor told her to stay in bed and apply ice packs, and so she did. And her quick action paid off: the bleeding stopped, and seven months later the baby she had nearly lost was born.

Having expected a Christmas baby, Shirley and Roald had the name Kristofer Jon ready for a boy, but when Christmas came and went, and then the New Year, they laid that name aside, and picked a new one: **Erik Paul.**

When I first read this story about myself, and made the discovery that on that spring day in June my mother could easily have miscarried, that I very well might not have been born at all—it dawned on me how vulnerable my existence had been.

That, for those few hours and days, as my mother lay in bed applying ice packs and sending up prayers, the story of my life-yet-to-be was hanging by a thread.

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WHY AM I TELLING YOU THIS?

In the same week in which I was recalling this story—my story—as remembered by my mother, I also was studying the story of Mary, as remembered by Luke; the story of the Stranger who brought her a message that was both profoundly troubling and strangely exhilarating at the same time.

Nearly all we know about Mary comes from the first two chapters of Luke's gospel.

Mark's gospel doesn't mention her. Matthew does—but his birth story centers more on Joseph than Mary. John's gospel includes Mary in scenes at the wedding in Cana and at the foot of the cross. But John says nothing about the circumstances of Jesus' birth.

So it's here in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel that we find our most complete portrait of her. And still we're left full of questions.

- Exactly how old was Mary?
- Did the day begin for her like any other day, this day the Stranger came?
- Was she washing clothes or hanging laundry?
- Or maybe down at the well getting the day's supply of water?
- Was she working in the fields? Preparing dinner? Tending goats?

The Stranger appears, and she is alone. What could he want?

GREETINGS, FAVORED ONE! THE LORD IS WITH YOU.

Mary was engaged to Joseph. Men did not approach her with their inquiring eyes. She had heard plenty from the older women about the ways of men. But never before had she heard words spoken like these, spoken as if he knew who she was.

DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY, FOR YOU HAVE FOUND FAVOR WITH GOD. AND NOW, YOU WILL CONCEIVE IN YOUR WOMB AND BEAR A SON, AND YOU WILL NAME HIM JESUS. HE 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. HE WILL REIGN OVER THE HOUSE OF JACOB FOREVER, AND OF HIS KINGDOM THERE WILL BE NO END.

It was a lot to take in. Her ear didn't catch it all at first--you know how it is the first time you hear unsuspected news: a gulf opens up between your ears and your brain.

But one thing had come in crystal clear: the Stranger said she would bear a son.

Even though she was engaged to a man, the wedding was some time off yet.
And they weren't sharing a bed, so…

HOW CAN THIS BE? she wonders.

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.

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The Stranger stood there. He had finished. Now he was waiting for her response.

This silence. . . . these moments before she answers him, are, for me, some of the most powerful moments in all of Scripture.

God had a plan, you see, and it was already under foot, but God needed Mary to give it birth.
Without Mary's YES, nothing would proceed. This is what we so easily miss.

In this silence, as Gabriel waits, we catch a glimpse of **the incredible risk God is willing to take**; to put his whole plan, the entire story line of his promise of the ages, into the hands and the mind of one young teenaged girl.

Most of the time, when we read the Bible, we just don't see that risk.
We hear the story as, perhaps, we almost always have heard it.

We skip over the gaps; we cruise through the silences, when all creation seems to hold its breath, the moments when the heart is stopped in the throat, and God Himself leans forward, the divine ear dialed in and waiting for a response.

For the past nearly 55 years, it's been easy for me not to ponder the details of that hanging-by-a-thread story of June 8th, 1956, the day that could have meant I never was.

The truth is, there are moments like this in each of our lives, and the majority of the time we're not even aware of them. We don't see, or can't remember, the risk, how the trajectory of everything in our life and future would be changed.

So often we see the Biblical story, God's story, in a similar fashion:
as a done deal, with no gaps, no cliff-hangers, no suspense, no hanging by a thread.

And when we tune this out, skip over the gaps, we run the risk of missing the very heart of the story—we miss our chance to catch God in the act –

- To see God stepping out on the limb,
- God working without a net,
- willingly sharing the stage of this divine drama with you, with me, with Mary.

In those moments between the Stranger's message, and her response, Mary's life, her future, everything she had known, everything she had allowed herself to think her life might become, was **shaken, altered, turned upside down.**

And in that sacred moment, she made up her mind.
Mary put her trust in the Stranger,
put her trust in his Message,
put her trust in the promises of God:

HERE AM I, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD; LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

Mary said YES.

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And what about you, dear friends?

When God surprises you, comes knocking at your door, inviting you into a new chapter, onto a new pathway, toward a new life, will you, too, say YES?

Let us pray:

Living One…who gave to Mary anxious perplexity, faith to believe, and the space to say "Yes," keep us alert for visiting angels, that we may hear your call, be honest yet faithful, and know that for you, nothing is impossible, in Jesus Christ. Amen.[1]

[1] Brian Wren, *Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: Liturgies and Prayers for Public Worship.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). Page 66, edited.