

Christmas Eve Message - December 24, 2021

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Luke 1:26-38

We have just heard the story of the annunciation: when the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce that she is favored by God; and chosen to be the mother of God's Son. Mary is, understandably, perplexed and afraid. *Why me? Why now? Why this?*

But in a few short verses, Mary hears and understands what it is that God has chosen her to do and what this would mean; responding, "Here am I...Let it be with me according to your word." Given what was being asked of her, maybe the greatest miracle of the Christmas story is that Mary said yes.

Little could she have known, of course, the additional obstacles that would stand in her way; that she would be forced to travel with Joseph in the final days of her pregnancy and give birth in an unfamiliar town; in a stable, no less.

Can you just imagine their ambivalence and profound disorientation – not yet married, not knowing where they would go or who, if anyone, would notice their child's birth; somewhat like the mixed feelings and confusion so many of us are experiencing now: with so many among us sick or stressed, weary or worried. We can hardly imagine what life will be like three weeks or three months from now: together or apart, beyond the surge or fighting yet another variant?

At the end of the Christmas story – after the baby is laid in the manger, the angels appear in the fields, and the shepherds make their way to the stable – we're told that Mary treasured and pondered everything she had seen and heard in her heart. After all the surprises and the disorientation, the fear and joy, Mary kept the miracle of Christmas with her: that she had been chosen by God and given the opportunity to respond; that she had heard and, indeed, seen the angel's lesson: that nothing is impossible with God.

In the midst of a confusing and disorienting world, we are challenged to see and hear that God – for whom nothing is impossible – is, likewise, choosing us; calling us to believe and to respond: not letting obstacles and uncertainty limit the ways we participate in the Christmas miracle of saying yes: here I am, let it be so.

Over a century ago, on December 25, 1905, Henry van Dyke offered these words in a short sermon entitled, "Keeping Christmas." I've chosen not to change his gendered language, hoping that you will hear what, in these words, remains relevant today:

It is a good thing to observe Christmas day. The mere marking of times and seasons, when men agree to stop work and make merry together, is a wise and wholesome custom. It helps one to feel the supremacy of the common life over the individual life. It reminds a man to set his own little watch, now and then, by the great clock of humanity which runs on sun time.

But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas.

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground; to see that your fellow-men are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness--are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open--are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world--stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death--and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you keep it for a day, why not always?