

- If your house and your life are anything like my house and my life at this time of year,
- then maybe we should spend these next 15 minutes in silent meditation.
- *It is four days before Christmas.*
- The kids are out of school well and have been for a while now.
- There are different plans to negotiate, presents to wrap--maybe, even yet to buy--and there's strange new traditions working its way into this 2020 Christmas.
- *It is four days before Christmas.*
- The waiting is almost over...and for some,
- like the children in my house who provide daily lamentation,
- the waiting ***is taaaaking foorrreewwwerrrr.***
- *It is four days before Christmas.*
- A time that--for many of us--is so often full of emotion:
- Missing loved ones who may not be able to travel to be together this Christmas...
- missing loved ones who have passed this year and will be with us in spirit this Christmas...
- It is four days before Christmas.
- Some of us may feel a sigh of relief knowing Christmas will be quieter this year...
- but I would guess each of us in some way will miss the holy rhythms of this season,
- miss the joy we find in the chaos,

- miss the gift of being with family--even if they sometimes drive us crazy--
- and miss the wonder of the babe in a manger who entered our world because this year just feels all that more different.
- One thing I also feel we miss is today's story and the audacity of it...
- a story that stands at the beginning of the gospel,
- this story about how the One we call Lord came to be--fully human and fully divine.
- It's the Sunday before Christmas, the 4th Sunday of Advent, and we can almost skim right by it, with all that comes with the days of preparation for December 24 and 25th...
- But I urge you to be with me for a few minutes as we walk through this story of Mary... this courageous and wild beginning of what leads us to Christmas.
- Think about it for a second....
- An angel named Gabriel makes an appearance to a teenage girl.
- Gabriel announces that this teenage girl, still a virgin, would conceive a son.
- That this son would be the Son of the Most High--a King who would fulfill the hopes of the House of David.
- That Mary's relative Elizabeth had also had an angelic encounter and a miraculous conception.
- And...to all of these incredible and incredibly demanding requests--the teenager named Mary said yes! "Let it be with me according to your word..."
- Now, even With these key details... putting myself in her shoes...
- I have so many questions to ask Mary:
- When did you tell your parents you were pregnant?
- Did you tell Joseph yourself, or did the gossip of Nazareth take care of that for you?

- Did anyone in the village believe your story?
- After Gabriel departed, did you doubt his visitation?
- Question your sanity? Fear for your life?
- The story of the Annunciation is one of the most familiar ones in the New Testament.
- Almost too familiar that we graze right by these unbelievable live changing moments!
- From this mind-boggling introduction,
- an even more mind-boggling and rapid-fire narrative follows.
- The angel greets Mary, calling her God's "favored one."
- He describes the divine plan for a miraculous conception.
- Mary expresses doubt,
- Gabriel explains God's plan in greater detail... ok great helpful....
- Mary consents, and the angel departs.
- That's it?
- At least half of what's maddening about this story is its brevity.
- We know that Mary was "much perplexed" by Gabriel's words,
- and that she "pondered" his greeting.
- We know from her question ("How can this be, since I am a virgin?") that she recognized the bizarre nature of the angel's announcement.
- And we know from her last words to the angel that she agreed to God's plan.
- But when reading it, it seems all of but just a moment to think about it before answering yes!
- When **reading** a story, there is not much room to describe and pause
- "in the wait time in a story such as this." Because you have to assume there was some wait time, and not just a second of ponder? Right?

- If it were a movie, I am sure we would be held in some long pauses of perplexed quiet, possibly some dramatic music, and camera angles that make us hold our breath.... Waiting to see how she would respond to Gabriel's message.
- But then as soon as she agreed the angel departed from her.
- Like as soon as he got her answer Gabriel was gone.
- This is a moment I always dread as well....
- It's the moment when the prayer ends, the vision recedes, the certainty wavers.
- It's the moment after the "yes," the moment when the mountaintop experience fades into memory, and life in the valley begins.
- I wonder....how different Mary's experience might have been if Gabriel had stuck around to erase her doubts and silence her critics.
- But no, he departed, leaving the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship to Mary.
- Her "yes" didn't signal the end of mystery and wonder. The Mystery, wonder, and questions of "what did I just say yes to?" had only begun.
- A popular Christmas song addressed to Mary asks what she knew when she consented to Gabriel's request:
 - "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?"
 - Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?"
 - We have no way of knowing what Mary knew.
 - My guess is that like us, she knew just enough to get started.
 - My guess is that the work of bearing God into the world involved ceaseless discovery and ongoing consent, just as it does today.

- My guess is that each trembling "yes" Mary whispered into God's heart, changed the world.
- PAUSE
- What incredible tension there must have been...
- between "How can this be" and "Let it be with me according to you word."
- But going from one moment to the next DOES move us from the absence of God (1:34),
- to the presence of God (1:35),
- to the fulfillment of the promises of God (1:36).
- Somehow, somehow, this short but poignant text will negotiate the radical transformation in only three short verses,
- from peasant girl to prophet,
- from Mary to mother of God,
- from denial to discipleship.
- In a very real way, this is the appropriate transition from Advent to Christmas.
- Mary's story moves us all from who we think we are to what God has called us to be,
- from observant believer to confessing apostle.
- Moreover, remarkably, impossibly, Mary's story demands that we acknowledge the very transformation of God.
- It is no small journey to go from our comfortable perceptions of God
- to God in the manger, vulnerable, helpless, dependent.
- Yet, this is the promise of Christmas.
- Amen.