

Advent 4, Year B 2023  
St. Clare's Episcopal Church  
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I enjoy reading all of the church signs around town. They are clever and catchy, and some are inspirational. Some of them, though, also present a rather simple point of view of the life of faith. If you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior everything will be good.

My experience of saying yes to God hasn't always made my life simpler, or easier. I think if we had a chance to interview Mary, she might agree. Her simple response to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" sets in motion a life with consequences that she could never have imagined.

Mary lives in a world that is ordered and controlled by imperial Rome, where one man, Caesar Augustus, can throw the whole realm into motion. The Israelites are a people subjugated by the whims and rages of both the distant Roman rulers and the local Roman army. Rome dominates everything, Rome controls everything, so when Caesar says jump, they have no choice but to jump.

It's no wonder that Mary's response to the angel is her song, the Magnificat: through her willingness, God will turn the world right-side-up, bring down the powerful from their thrones and raise up the oppressed, feed the hungry with the good things of Creation, send the overstuffeds away empty, help the Jewish people and remember promises made all the way back to Abraham. Caesar may be issuing orders in the world, but Mary's belief is that God is keeping promises of universal proportions.

The Holy of Holies, a quiet, dark, and hidden place at the symbolic center of the Jerusalem Temple, is the center of the entire universe in ancient Judaism. Mary's story, through her kinsmen, is linked to the Holy of Holies. The story does not begin with a political or military leader, like the Governor of Syria, but with an old priest, Zechariah, who is married to an old woman, Elizabeth, who is Mary's kinswoman. Zechariah is of the priestly tribe of Aaron, and he meets the angel Gabriel while carrying out his part in bringing the world into balance by performing Temple service. From the start of Luke's story, one thing is clear: it may be a Roman world, but it is God's universe, no matter what Caesar Augustus thinks.

So Mary accepts the angel's request from God that she bear a child, who is promised to be the one to bring about changes of universal proportions.

I wonder what the world would be like if we were more willing to hear God's requests of our lives? Mary is a good model for us. She listens, she ponders, she asks good questions, she is afraid but fear doesn't hold her back.

Perhaps the poetry she sings out in the Magnificat is more than a hope or wish. Perhaps it is a response to the God she already knows, who has a deep and abiding love for his people and throughout their relationship has shown the characteristics that Mary mentions: mercy, goodness, kindness, justice, and deep affection for the least powerful

people in the world. Perhaps, she does know something of what she's getting into when she says "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary reminds us what it looks like when God shows up in our lives – unannounced (startling perhaps?), inconvenient (maybe she was going shopping that day?), unplanned (maybe Mary liked things in good order and this interruption wasn't fitting her expectations).

The annunciation to Mary can help remind us that this event should be unsettling, maybe even upsetting, especially if we have tried to decide how events in our lives will unfold. Like when we ask God to arrive, and we don't see any evidence of God. Or when we think we have everything under control, and God enters our lives unbidden and we are thrown out of our routine, out of the comfort we have created for ourselves, out of the convenience we had predicted.

For me, God intrudes when I see a person who needs help. How to help? What to do? How much time will it take? Is it safe? God intrudes when I turn on the news and hear about injustice, racism, threats of war. What do I do? How can I make a difference? Who am I when the problems are so large? God interrupts our lives in many different ways. How do we listen to God? Our ancestors in the faith had many ways of listening to God. Through angels, and dreams, and visions, and the tradition. Can we expand the way that we pay attention to God?

If we have faith, and believe in the God of mercy and justice and kindness and love, then God will intrude into our lives on a daily basis - pray that we are able to listen. There will be times when God's presence causes little adjustments, and there will be times when the intrusions will be much larger – a move, a sacrificial change in our lives. God intervenes in our lives when God needs our help and when we need God. God intervenes when the Kingdom of God is in peril. And so we have no choice but to follow Mary's example and respond, "Here we are."

Amen.