

## **Yes?...or No?**

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
December 21, 2008

It wasn't easy being God's chief messenger.

Of course, this was much better news, Gabriel supposed, than the news that was told to Daniel so long ago—the explanation of the visions of who would fall from power and who would rise. And hopefully it would go better than the visit to Zechariah in the temple; the old man didn't believe the words that he and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, who would grow to be a prophet of the Most High. Now Gabriel was being sent to Mary, and this visit would perhaps be the toughest of all.

She was so young. So powerless. And so faithful—or he hoped. Yes, he hoped for that most strongly.

You see, the news Gabriel was to bring to Mary would definitely be capable of messing up her life: she would conceive immediately and then bear the Son of God. She was betrothed, but not yet married. She still lived in her father's house, not her husband's. There as yet had been no wedding feast, no first night together as husband and wife. For her to say yes to God could cost her dearly—her husband, reputation, her family. After all, who would believe her that this child would be of God? They would just think she was telling a story to try to save her life—which could very much be in danger. For stoning was the penalty for adultery, and that's what people would assume happened. Her parents could send her away under some pretense—but tongues would wag regardless. No, convincing this Mary would not be easy.

## **Yes?...or No?**

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
December 21, 2008

If only God hadn't insisted on the whole free will thing, Gabriel thought. That's what started this trouble to begin with.

Right from the get go, humanity had been contrary. Given so much, they often forgot that they belong as much to this earth as much as the sheep and goats they are so fond of herding. Too often, they tended toward pride and disobedience, misusing the little control and/or power they had. And yet, at their best, they bore the image of the One who created them. The One who has continually showed them mercy, compassion, forgiveness. The One who loves them—always has, and always will.

For Love that is not freely given, God told Gabriel, is not love. That kind of love would carry the element of fear—and there is no fear in God's love. I want relationship with my people, a relationship grounded in trust. But that has to be up to them. I call to them, to try to guide them on the right path, God said—and as much as their sin anguishes my heart, the choice is theirs.

Just as Mary's choice is hers, Gabriel sighed.

So Gabriel went to the one called Mary, and greeted her in a way that would hopefully make her receptive to God's news. For, beyond all reason, she was favored by God, and God would be with her always on this journey. That part was indeed true. The son she would conceive and bear would be great indeed, a king of a kingdom that knew no end. That was true too. Of course, you may notice that Gabriel didn't go into the details what would happen on the way to this

## **Yes?...or No?**

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
December 21, 2008

greatness—accusations, pain, suffering, death. But that was not part of the message given to Gabriel to deliver, and so he refrained. And then, Gabriel waited.

Mary appeared frightened, then attentive, and was now confused. A son—a baby? She may be young, but she knew how things worked. Women do not conceive on their own—even in the stories from old, barren women who then bore children had husbands to ensure this happened. And she had been faithful to her betrothed, keeping herself above reproach. It would not do to dishonor him, his family—or her own. So this, how could this physically happen?

It was a good question, Gabriel mused.

And so Gabriel explained, as best as one can explain a mystery, the Holy Spirit's work in a very real and tangible way. And then, Gabriel offered Mary something even better than dreams of greatness—he offered her hope, offered her companionship for the journey. He told her about Elizabeth; now pregnant despite all the odds. Elizabeth, who had suffered so because she had borne no children, now knew joy. For nothing, Gabriel stated, is impossible with God. The One who created the entire universe simply by calling it into being could certainly handle the creation of a baby, right?

But only if Mary said yes.

## **Yes?...or No?**

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
December 21, 2008

Whatever thoughts or misgivings Mary may have wrestled with while all of heaven waited with bated breath are beyond our knowing. But this we do know—despite all the potential problems and dangers, Mary took a leap of faith—and said yes. She said yes to God, yes to life, yes to a new creation. She said yes to turning her life upside down, to letting God replace her plans with plans of God's own.

She said yes! Maybe, Gabriel pondered, there was hope for humanity after all—all of humanity.

You see, to us, Mary's simple 'yes' changed and touched many lives, including yours and mine. We may look to Mary as an example of perfect obedience, and because we have not recognized or yet met our own Gabriel, we assume that we will not be asked to do something so great and dangerous and notable as Mary. If so, we forget that God works in many ways—through other people as well as angels. For God asks us to always be ready to receive God, and God's invitation to work with and walk with God in our lives. God's plans are often not our own, and it is rare that a call from God meshes so neatly with our carefully constructed plans. And when that unexpected call comes, we are faced with a choice—do we set aside our life, our plans, for God's? Or do we refuse to be interrupted, thus turning God down? God is patient, it is true; and yes, we do have free will. We can say no.

Mary could have said no.

**Yes?...or No?**

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
December 21, 2008

But Mary said yes, yes to God's plan for her life. Like God desires so much of all of us, she trusted, she had faith; she believed Gabriel's words that nothing, absolutely nothing, is impossible with God.

Will you?

Amen.