

## Yes to God – Advent Sermon

Sisters and brothers, here we are on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent. It is this time of looking to God's promises in the past, to the history of God's promises, and to a time when God's promises will be fulfilled. The season of Advent is a season of waiting and wondering, a season of saying Yes to God and hearing God's encouraging Do Not Be Afraid!

We have new people joining the church today, and we celebrate their Yes to God and to God's awesome family. And we have Mary's song of praise which she can sing because she is not alone but with a wonderful friend who is supporting her songs and her dreams.

Here God's promises begin to be fulfilled—not in some future time, but now. Today, in the story of these two women—one old enough to be a grandmother, the other too young to be married—God's promises begin to be fulfilled.

This story of the two women begins earlier in the first chapter of Luke. First the angel Gabriel appears to the priest Zechariah in the temple, and promises a baby will be born to this elderly, previously childless couple. Elizabeth indeed becomes pregnant. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel appears to the young Mary, Elizabeth's relative, greeting her with the words, "Do not be afraid."

In response to Gabriel's startling promise that she will become the mother of the Son of God, young Mary replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary says a very big "Yes" to God. Gabriel also shares the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy, and Mary rushes off to visit her, which is where today's story picks up.

As I said at the beginning, in Advent we are looking at God's promises. And today I want to explore a bit what it may mean saying Yes to God. I suspect that many of us, if we found ourselves in Mary's situation, might be considerably more reluctant than she was to utter the words, "Here I am, at God's service; ready, willing and able to let it be."

Now of course, none of us will ever find ourselves exactly in Mary's shoes: according to the Christian story, Jesus' birth to a virgin mother was a once for all time event. But that's not to say that God doesn't ask things of us, perhaps even great things.

In my experience, especially in my experience of people in the church, in recent years, we have some mighty struggles around saying Yes to God. I think we struggle in part because in the liberal church we attach such a

high value to freedom of choice, to personal autonomy. We prefer to say yes conditionally; for now; until perhaps some better opportunity comes along, that we would rather say yes to.

The idea of saying Yes to God totally, unreservedly—as Mary did—scares us, because we just don't want to make that kind of total commitment. When Gabriel visits Mary, he tells her that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” So much for personal autonomy. Mary gives her life over to God's purposes. Most of us don't really want to do that, just in case something better comes along.

Mary says Yes because she has a basic, foundational trust in God. She believes that she can't do better than trusting in God, turning over her life to God. For her, saying Yes to God is her ticket to the very best life possible. Why is that?

Is it because she is poor, because she doesn't have money, possessions, opportunities provided by high social status—all those things that may lead us to trusting in ourselves, rather than in God? Is that why God is her best option? Then blessed are the poor.

Is it because she is young, because she hasn't yet become invested in a system which provides status and privilege to those who have built and maintained it? Is it because she has nothing to lose that she trusts in God? Then blessed are the young.

And this is where I think we find other reasons for our reluctance to say Yes to God. Many of us are not poor. Most of us are not teenagers anymore as Mary was. Many of us are stuck with our things and possessions and in systems that provide status and privilege.

When we hear in Mary's song of praise, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,” our ears perk up a bit. And when that is followed by, “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty,” we begin to think: “Hey, wait a minute—filling up the hungry sounds good, but sending the rich away empty?”

It sounds like God is taking sides, raising up the poor and bringing down the rich. It sounds like a radical political and economic program, and we're not so sure we want to go there. We begin to wonder about what we might be asked to give up in saying Yes to God. First our personal autonomy—our freedom of choice—and then our economic autonomy—our freedom to use our money and possessions in whatever ways we choose, including keeping them to ourselves.

Mary's song of praise exults in God taking control of her life, and taking control of the world. She celebrates God's turning the world upside down because it reflects the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises. No more hunger, no more oppression, no more humiliation for those who are poor, and no more fear.

This was profoundly good news for Mary: how do we make it good news for us? How do we join Mary in her song of praise? Well, we need to look at our lives, and at our choices, and at the world around us. Do we like what we see?

Are we okay with virtually the entire country of Syria being turned into rubble, with a quarter of a million people killed, and 11 million people being bombed out of their homes? Within our own, rich, country, are we okay with the poverty and limited life chances many of our neighbours are facing? Just thinking of our Monday clients here at the Tafel of Philippuskirche...

Closer to home, are we okay with the fact that many children who attend schools in this city, don't have enough to eat, don't have enough support, don't have great stuff to do in the school holidays?

Even closer to home, are we okay with the ways that the Christmas season has become a season of excess spending, with an endless series of Black Fridays? Are we okay with the fact that at this time of year we are tempted to throw all sense aside, and say yes to all kinds of things we would normally say no to?

You see, it seems to me that there are a lot of things in our world, and in our lives, that if we're not exactly saying yes to them, we're not saying No to them, either; there are a lot of things that we are willing to tolerate. Things that, if we listen to Scripture, God is not willing to tolerate.

The point of all this is not to make us all feel guilty, to bring us all down. It's to help us to rethink what we want to say Yes to; what we rejoice in, what brings us joy; what it is that we hope for. It's to help us look at what we do, and what we achieve, what kind of world we make, and what kind of community we make, and what kind of lives we make, when left to our own devices. And of course to reflect what kind of world, and community, and lives we make when we do not say Yes to God.

When we look around what we see is basically the best that we can do. Maybe it's time, this Christmas, to set our sights a little higher. To open ourselves to angelic visitors, who show us a vision of how God wants the world to be, and how the world can be, if each of us would take our part; if

each of us had the courage—or perhaps the foolishness—that Mary had, if each of us were willing to say Yes to God.

Imagine: no more hunger, no more oppression, no more humiliation for those who are poor, and no more fear. No more bombs in Syria, no more burden of shame for sisters and brothers living in poverty; no more dread of the Christmas break. That's God's dream; that's what Mary said Yes to. Can we make it our dream, too? Can we say Yes like Mary did?

You know, I'm a very well structured and organized German; I don't think I would do too well if an angel showed up in my office one day and said, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." I think I'd probably wonder if I had overdone it all a bit and were just beginning to go crazy...

The truth is, I struggle with this every day. I do believe that every day God asks me to turn over the whole of my life, and every day I say a few little Yes's, and a whole lot of little No's to God.

But I do know this: like Mary, I believe that turning over my life to God is my ticket to the very best life possible for me. I just haven't worked out all the practical implications of that yet. I'm grateful for God's mercy and patience with me.

After the sermon, in the silent time, perhaps you will as I will, pray to God for the courage and the foolishness to say more Yes's to God, on the way to saying the big Yes that Mary said. Amen.

Silence

Let us sing hymn number 209 "Blessed Be the God of Israel"