

Shadow and Light: Joyful Anticipation

Luke 1:26-38

December 11, 2022

Around our house this season, a new Christmas movie has replaced classics like *Charlie Brown* and *Rudolph* as the family favorite. Thanks to Ben and Sam's persistence and preference, I believe that I have seen the movie *The Star* eight times since Thanksgiving. It's a 2017 animated film—available on Prime Video or Hulu for those interested—that casts "Bo the Donkey" in a key supporting role in the events that led to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It basically follows the story in Luke's Gospel, but there are notable departures beyond the talking animals, including three hilariously perceptive camels. One such departure comes at the very beginning of the story. In the first scene, Mary—engaged and living alone in Nazareth—is visited by a blinding light and a mysterious voice delivering the news of her miraculous pregnancy. It's this morning's text from the first chapter of Luke, often called the Annunciation, but the movie script gives Mary an extra line. Stunned, she responds, "Thank you. Do I say thank you? I mean, yes." The angelic force departs, and the story moves on. But I must confess that even after eight viewings, I find myself moved by this cinematic interpretation of that particular moment.

Mary says yes. The interaction between a young woman named Mary and an angel named Gabriel is perhaps the most extraordinary moment in all of scripture. It is the kind of scene that is made for a pageant (or a movie). It's filled with drama and suspense, with poetry and scriptural interpretation. In Luke's telling, though, Gabriel the angel gets almost all of the lines. The chatty cherub speaks for nine of the twelve verses you heard. And his words, I suppose, are in fitting fashion for an angel, but they feel a little stiff to me. They are pious and formal. ("Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you!") His

description of Jesus, rhetorically powerful, draws on the words of the Old Testament prophets. ("Son of the Most High.") And he closes his case by repeating words first spoken to Abraham and Sarah, and then to Mary's own relative, Elizabeth and Zechariah. "Nothing will be impossible with God." And then, the angel stops. There is a moment of silence.

Now, that moment is not recorded in the script. There are no stage directions. No pause is included. You might miss it entirely if you move, as I often do, too quickly to that next line.

But this morning, what if we hit the pause button? What if we froze the action on the stage in that silence?

And then, what if we shifted the spotlight from that radiant angelic force to that very human girl?

Who knows how long the silence lasted?

Here's how I see it. Choirs of angels in Heaven utterly hushed. Gabriel leaning forward, his hands clasped in prayer. Somehow all of creation waits to hear Mary's answer. And all of history, the salvation of humankind, the redemption of creation itself, hinges on her next words. I imagine the God of the universe taken by the suspense.

And here's the radical thing about Advent you might miss on the way to the manger if you move too quickly. God takes a risk. Almighty God, Lord of the universe, chooses to rely on the faithfulness of a human creature. Salvation enters the world in the form of a tiny infant. God chooses the clearest picture of vulnerability we can imagine.

And if you can hear that, then listen to this: It has always been the way of our God, entrusting ordinary

humans to carry out the work of the kingdom, choosing to empower and depend on Mary and you and me. We're still paused in that moment, and I wonder, *how will Mary respond?* She opens her mouth, and Mary says yes.

In fact, she speaks words she would have known by heart because she would have learned them in Sunday school. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." Do you recognize it? It is the answer of the saints, of Abraham and Jacob, of Samuel and David, of Isaiah and, now, a young woman named Mary in a backwater town far from thrones and war horses and power. "Here I am," she says, and in those words, Mary makes known to Gabriel and to all the world her choice. She too takes a risk. In my mind, the angel exhales, relieved that this visit has not been in vain. In my mind, God smiles, for another one chosen has responded in faith. In my mind, the powers of sin and death are given notice that their days are numbered, and the weary world is given reason to rejoice again. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness see the flicker of holy light, for a child will be born. And so, God's gracious plan can unfold.

But only—*only*—because Mary says yes.

Now, I know. I know what some of you are thinking and some of you might say. *She had no choice. It was the voice of God. God's plan and all.* I know. If so, there is no miracle because there is no risk. If so, there is no anticipation, and therefore there can be no genuine joy. This is what every child on Christmas Eve, and anyone who remembers what it was to be one, knows so very well. Perched at the top of the stairs or piled in their parents' bed, they know that joy is magnified by the anticipation of it. That joy is deepened when we choose it.

No, I am confident in this: Mary's yes is not in the script. The answer is her own, her real-time response. She chooses to join God's plan of salvation that will bring good news of great joy to all people.

And that, my friends, is your choice too. In just two weeks, ready or not, the calendar will say Christmas Day. But I wonder if we can freeze the action for just

a moment. Hit the pause button. Shift the spotlight from choirs of angels to a congregation gathered in worship. I wonder if we can shift the spotlight from Gabriel to a family around the table, a driver waiting in traffic, a student sitting in the last week of class, a weary traveler seeking rest, a couple on the verge of a difficult decision. The season of Advent is all about anticipation. And what if God waits too? Can you imagine God waiting for you? God waiting for you to bring the gospel to life?

It hit me for the first time this year that Advent is a question. It waits for our response. What would it look like for you to say yes?

Here's what happened to Mary. Her yes marked a milestone, a transformation, a journey from shadow into light, from peasant girl to poetic prophet.

Advent is a question. What does it ask you this year?

Forgive me for meddling, but maybe there is someone in your life with whom you long to be reconciled. Perhaps you regret harsh words spoken. Perhaps there is someone whose presence you miss in this season of togetherness. Perhaps the distance seems too great. Advent says there is still time to seek reconciliation, still time to ask and give forgiveness.

Maybe you have ignored the call to serve or give in a way that seemed for you impossible, but what Advent says is that there is still time to believe that nothing is impossible with God. Still time.

Maybe you are consumed by grief, paralyzed by fear, anxiety, or dread in this season of celebration. Advent says there is still time for joy to find you.

Maybe you're finding it hard to hope for a world dominated by division and acts of hatred. There is still time to do your part.

Maybe you can't yet believe that God would call you to bring the gospel to life. There is still time to quiet your mind and hear your name called by the one who created you.

And maybe you're just too busy, too preoccupied, too

overwhelmed, too tired. Advent says there is still time to renew your spirit and realign your priorities.

This morning, see the world through the eyes of a courageous woman who became the bearer of God's greatest gift. This morning, see that human child, that crying baby, utterly dependent on our response. Hear in Mary's story your own call to respond to the question Advent asks.

You see, the incarnation was not a one-time event and Christmas not just a day on the calendar. The birth of Jesus does not happen *to* us or *for* us. Christmas requires a response. It comes in the voice of one who bravely accepts the call of God to take a risk and bring a baby to a broken world. It is the risk taken by all who hear the voice of an angel and respond with firm voice and bold faith, "Here I am."

Mary says yes. And then, she sings. Not because all is well or suddenly set right, but because she has heard God speak and has responded. "My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior." Her song is of anticipation for the reign of God already on its way, when the broken will finally be healed, the haughty will finally be humbled, tyrants torn down, weapons of war turned to tools of cultivation, the world itself turned upside down. It is not only the birth of her son that she anticipates; it is the transformation of the world. Nothing will be impossible with God.

She sees it. She knows. She says yes. She sings. Even in the shadows of today, she sings of a different tomorrow.

Yes, Mary said yes, and now it's your turn.

Advent is a question. As God waits for your answer, know this: joy is on the way.