

“Yes, this is a shock,...and this is my life.”

First Sermon in the Advent Series: “Yes, And...Being Open + Making Space”

Yes, you can be open to different ideas...

and you can create space for them within what you already know.

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

As we enter this Advent season – a season of waiting and expectation – we move to our third set of spiritual practices in this year of trying to become a “Yes, And...” people who are equipped to follow our “Yes, And...” God.¹

You could say that the birth of Christ is both the biggest “Yes” and the biggest “And” of all. Yes, God loves us enough to continue to find new ways to reach out to us, *And* the birth of Jesus sends us the clearest example of God’s nature and love to date – a humble baby, who will grow and be open to the world and to all the new things he will learn as he lives and walks this earth...all the while pointing us toward a different kind of living...a living that prioritizes love of God and love of neighbor over all else.

The birth of a baby to two ordinary folks was not the

expected way for God to intervene into our lives...and yet it has become expected or “normalized” to us, 2,000+ years later. But what must that news have been like when it was first received? Did people really believe God worked in the world in that active of a way? Do we? Do we think we already know how God works and even when God tries to show us otherwise, are we blind to it? Our vision so clouded by our own preconceived notions?

In some ways, people (especially people in power) struggled with the reality of Jesus because he changed everything they knew and thought about the world and religion and governing and living. Jesus wasn’t about climbing up the leadership ladder, he was all about reaching down and around to those near him – to connect with them, to speak to them, to heal them, to laugh with them,

¹ See <https://calvarydenver.org/about/this-years-theme-of-yes-and> if you are unfamiliar with this theme.

to cry with them, to dine with them, and yes, even to die among them. Who is this God who forgoes all “God-like” privileges for the sake of relating to people?

Well, this season we’re going to find out...exploring anew who Jesus is and what it means for him to be born into our lives and our world today.

And to do so, we engage our third set of spiritual practices – Being Open + Making Space: *“Yes, you can be open to different ideas...and you can create space for them within what you already know.”*

It is possible to be open to new ideas, people, and thoughts, and yet never actually make room for them in your life or your beliefs.

Sometimes in order to incorporate something new into our life, something old has to go. Sometimes two things cannot coexist together...one has to go for the other to take root and thrive. You quit your job in order to get a new job. You end a relationship to make space for a new person in your heart, etc.

Other times, however, we can incorporate something new into our life without letting go of previous held beliefs or ways of being in the world...we just have to make room for something new, which means something has to shift a bit, but not be dismissed altogether.

I think there’s this notion out there that to be open to a new belief or perspective, all of our old beliefs or perspectives have to go...or that somehow, the new thought or idea threatens our beloved, previously held thoughts or ideas. However, 9 times of 10, being open is not necessarily about throwing out old ideas. It’s more about making space within our current framework for how those ideas and beliefs might be enlightened or expanded upon.

Today’s text is case in point.

Do you think after her visit from the angel Gabriel, young Mary threw out her beliefs and understandings about how one becomes “with child”? I doubt it. I think she still knew that in her context and in her day and age for almost everybody, having a baby was the product of a being in a marriage and reproducing with one’s partner. And yet, for her, something

different had just happened. She couldn't explain it. I'm sure she didn't understand it. *And*, she was open to God's messenger and she made space, quite literally, within her body, and quite spiritually, within her heart, for this special baby boy.

The text makes this encounter between Gabriel and Mary seem like it only took a few moments. Pardon my paraphrase, but essentially what we have in Scripture is this:

Gabriel: *"Hi Mary. I'm Gabriel. You are awesome and God is with you."*

(I'm thinking there's probably a blank stare and silence from Mary as she flips through her rolodex in her head..."do I know this guy?")

Gabriel continues: *"You don't know me, but don't worry. God sent me because there's something God needs you to do...it may not feel like a good thing right now but eventually in 2,000+ years everyone will look back at this and say you were favored because God chose you. So get excited! You're gonna have a son named Jesus...and he's gonna be great and he's gonna change the world."*

Mary: *"Wait, wait, wait. Excuse me? What? I don't get it. I'm not even married to Joseph yet. I'm not pregnant!"*

Gabriel: *"Oh, I know. But you will be. But not by Joseph. By God. By the Holy Spirit. It sounds crazy, I know, but look at your cousin Elizabeth!? She was really old and got pregnant. God can do anything. Nothing is off limits or impossible."*

Mary, "whispering words of wisdom": *"Let it be. Let it be. Let it be. Let it be."* (Thank you Paul McCartney and John Lennon).

If we boil down this Scripture, we have a perfect example of something that happens to all of us at some point or another...just usually not this quickly.

1. Something happens in our life that is unexpected.
2. It shocks us.
3. We are afraid.
4. We question it.
5. We figure out that (despite our best efforts) there's nothing we can do about it. It is what it is.
6. We live with it.
7. Eventually, we accept it.
8. And – hopefully – down the line – we are transformed by it.

This is what happens to Mary. Before we get to how she DID respond, let's take a moment to think about all of the ways she could've responded:

“Ok Gabe. Nice to see you. Tell God thanks but no thanks.”

or

“You've got to be kidding me (teenage eye roll)...can you go now? I places to be, things to see...”

or

“Oh my God, my life is ruined forever (bursting out in sobs).”

or

“No! Get away from me! Get out of my house! (kicking and screaming and slamming the door in Gabriel's face)”

or

Thinking and questioning to herself: “Am I going crazy? Is this really an angel or am I just dreaming?”

or

“Oh no. Not gonna happen. Do you know what the gossip would be? That's not my M.O. No way Gabe. Not my message...try the Mary next door...”

or

“Oh yes! I always knew I was special and favored by God. I'm so awesome.” (that's the inflated ego response)

or

“Hmm...I don't think I understand...can you come in for a cup of tea and explain this to me...how it's all going to work? I have a zillion questions...”

or

“Ok, tell God I'm gonna make my pros and cons list and talk with my life coach and I'll get back with y'all.”

or

Or she could have gone silent.

There are *so* many ways Mary could have reacted. And we don't have the fullness of her reaction in scripture, but we do have where she ended up – at acceptance. “*Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*” (v 38). And then the angel departed from her. I love that sentence. Because so often in life it feels like the minute we finally accept unwelcome or surprising news...the scariest part of it – disappears. It departs. The clouds part, the fog lifts, and we can see a way forward even if difficult.

How do you respond to unexpected news? Shocking news?

I'm sure part of how you deal with it depends on whether it's happening to you, or someone

you love. In some cases, it's harder to deal with news about someone we love than news about ourselves.

We all have moments in life where something happens – a loss, a grief, a death, a diagnosis, a fight, a wreck, a betrayal, an illness, an accident, a phone call...something happens and we are shocked. Our world is rocked. In a moment. In a flash. And we are Afraid. Numb. Disoriented. Angry. Fearful. Frustrated. Resigned. In *these* situations, we have no choice but to be open to whatever news we just received...because it's not theoretical or philosophical – it's real. It's our life. Our loved one. Our future. It's a fact. And we can't change it.

So we are open to such events out of necessity, and yet to make space for them within our lives is a whole other ballgame. To move past denial and resistance to acceptance, and to incorporate how this news now shapes our every move and breath and decision --- well, that can take weeks, months, sometimes even years.

For Mary, the news Gabriel gave her was shocking. And yet, somehow, somehow, and in

some amount of time, she accepted that it was her life...and even embraced that this was her life...praising God, saying, "*My soul magnifies the Lord...*" (1:46).

Not all news is praiseworthy. But it is all prayer-worthy. We may not be praising God for something that has happened to us...but perhaps we're lamenting to God, like the psalmist praying, "*How long, O Lord?*" "*Why God, why?*"

Whether praise or lament, voicing our feelings to God is one way that we can move from that place of shock to that place of realization that this *is* my life now and what am I going to do with it?

When things are going well in my life, one of my favorite quotes is, "*If there is no shock, life remains in a lock.*" It's a cool quote when you are not in shock. When you are in shock...you'd give anything for your life to feel like it was locked up and unchanging. And yet, that's not life, is it? Life is always changing. The question is – are we?

God is always changing and adapting how God works in the world to how we are working.

Our faith is always changing and growing based on what life experiences we've had and what is shaping us. If everything around us is changing, what happens when we don't change or adapt? When we say we're "open to change," and yet don't make space in our life to incorporate those changes in meaningful ways?

My favorite Irish poet and author, John O'Donohue, reflects: "*I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.*"²

Wouldn't we all?

Or really, most of us would rather live telling the river HOW to flow...carving out its path...creating pathways around obstacles way in advance...planting what we want on its banks...putting what fish we want in its waters...adjusting the temperature, making sure the water is just right all year round.

And yet these words ring true..."*I would love to live like*

a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding."

It seems that that is what Mary does...she is carried by the surprise of Gabriel's news...carried all the way to her cousin Elizabeth's house...to process this news and to share her emotions. The text tells us she was there for three months. I'm guessing that's where the real journey to 'acceptance' took place. Not in that quick moment with Gabriel...but in the months of time with her good friend and confidant. The one who could see her and hear her...the one who knew her before this moment of shock and the one who would know her and love her after this baby was born and the whole town knew.

One of the ways that we prepare for the shocking news that will (at some point) happen to us all...is to practice adjusting to newness through learning and incorporating new thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives. Experiences change us by necessity, yes...and so do ideas and beliefs – if we let them. With experiences, it's harder to resist the change. With ideas, it's

² John O'Donohue, *Conamara Blues*, Feb. 3, 2004.

easier to resist newness so we have to have more practice, more willingness, more faith.

As we move into this Advent season, I invite us all to remain open to new ideas and perspectives and experiences, yes, and if it is right to do so, to actually make space for them within what we already know and within the patterns and habits of how we already live.

Sometimes we can hear something and be open to it and know – yep, that’s not for me. And that’s okay. And yet, more often than not, I find that I know that new ideas and perspectives are good for me and right to take in. I’m open to them but I never make space for them...because of my ego or my own comfort level or my pride of not wanting to be wrong.

As our country mourns the passing of a President George H.W. Bush, we also seemingly mourn an era of humility in leadership. As I was reading various tributes to President Bush yesterday, the one that struck me the most was from middle east negotiator, Aaron David Miller, who said:

“One day in 1982, when I was still a young intelligence analyst at the Department of State following Lebanon and the Palestinians, the phone rang in my office. It was the White House situation room on the line.

Shortly after the operator told me to hold, I heard George H.W. Bush, who was the vice president to Ronald Reagan at the time, say, ‘Aaron, I know you’re busy, but I read one of your memos on Lebanon. Do you have a few minutes to chat? I’m sorry to bother but I have a lot of questions.’”

Aaron continued his reflection saying,

“...after hanging up the phone, I was struck by a couple of [things]. First, there was the sheer humility and decency of Bush’s demeanor and attitude that morning.

[Second,] There was also his curiosity. Bush...knew what he didn’t know, and he showed a strong desire and urgency to find out. The desire to learn what you don’t know, rather than basing decisions on what you already do, is an essential quality of leadership.

Those qualities can give a president both the confidence to act based on sound empirical evidence, and a knowledge of when to hold back given uncertainties.”³

Knowing what we don't know is not only part of leadership, it is part of life. There is so much we do not know and do not understand. And yet we cannot let our not knowing keep us from living and moving forward...even if that moving forward is just taking one more breath or putting one foot in front of the other for one more day or making one more phone call to ask questions about something we need to know more about.

We practice Being Open + Making Space as spiritual practices because life is going to call on us to do just that with our lives...and practicing with our thoughts and beliefs and perspectives helps when something more serious really cracks open our life in a very real, irreversible way.

God's love...indeed, even God's favor (as we seen in

today's text)...does not mean that life will go according to our plan or that life will be easy. God's love and God's favor are not about making life smooth sailing...but rather helping us make meaning out of life when the waters are rough and stormy. When you read the stories in the Bible, which characters had it easy? Which ones did not go through incredibly difficult sufferings and changes? The Bible is a book about lives being turned upside down...time and time again...and God being there all along the way. That's what makes it our classic "*Yes, And...*" textbook for living.

A final lesson from our late President:

When former President George H.W. Bush's family and friends shared the news of his death they used the code word "*CAVU*," an acronym familiar to pilots that stands for "*ceiling and visibility unlimited*." Bush, who was a former navy pilot, had a plaque in his office with the word. "*He always felt it represented his life...The sky was the limit...*"⁴

³ Aaron David Miller, "George H.W. Bush showed his character in one phone call," *CNN.org* (1 Dec. 2018), accessed on Dec. 2, 2018 at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/01/opinions/george-h-w-bush-character-phone-call-miller/index.html>.

⁴ Eric Weisbrod, "The code word used to share news of George H.W. Bush's death," *Cnn.org* (Dec. 1, 2018), accessed on Dec. 2, 2018 at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/01/politics/george-h-w-bush-41-death-code-word/index.html>.

When we are open to new ideas and new experiences, and when we make space for them in our lives – they are CAVU – ceiling and visibility unlimited. *Yes, the sky is the limit, and even the sky cannot limit God’s possibilities.*

How God works in the world and in our lives will always be a mystery to us.

Will we fight that? Or will we lean into it?

You know, in the early church Mary was not referred to as much as the Mother of God as much as she was the *theotokos* – “the god bearer.”⁵ And as such, she bears within herself all the possibilities of God.

How about you?

You see, Mary is an example for us not because of her purity or youth or even her obedience. Mary is an example for us because of her openness to something beyond what she could ever imagine for herself. The news she received not only defied her own plans, it defied

the very ways that the world works.

Or maybe it didn’t. Because sometimes I don’t think we give God enough credit when it comes to how the world works.

God never promised us that we’d understand everything about our lives or the world. All we are promised is the HOPE of Emmanuel – God with us.

Perhaps the first thing we all need to be open to this Advent season is Gabriel’s proclamation...that “nothing is impossible with God” (v37). And if we make space for that truth within our lives, the “ceiling and visibility will be unlimited” and we, too, will be “god-bearers”...giving birth to all the possibilities we never thought possible. And isn’t that what hope is all about?

Amen.

⁵ Bob Cornwall, “Expecting a Divine Visitation -- A Lectionary Reflection for Advent 4B,” *Ponderings on a Faith Journey* (Dec. 16, 2014), accessed on Dec. 2,

2018 at <http://www.bobcornwall.com/2014/12/expecting-divine-visitation-lectionary.html>.