

## SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

What if she said no?

This story can't be reduced to a couple of sound bites where the theological doctrine that develops out of it becomes more important than the reality of what a first century young woman was experiencing. Centuries of church tradition have lifted this girl of Nazareth to what can feel like impossibly high status that isn't necessarily wrong but is certainly more about **the tradition** than it is about what she may have been feeling.

This is one of those times when we distance ourselves from the lived experience of our predecessors in faith because it's much easier to celebrate their story. It's much harder to imagine what they might have had to endure. But try...

On a random morning, in the midst of what may have otherwise been a very routine day, a messenger of the Lord shows up and starts telling a story that will become the foundation of your entire future. It's not a "breaking news" email or a "this just in" news update that tells of something happening on the other side of the world. This is a personal messenger of God showing up in Mary's home to tell her that she is so favored by God that she is going to bring God's child into the world.

I think I would have needed a lot of convincing.

I'm not sure Mary didn't need a lot of convincing – and that's part of what makes this story so dangerous. I'm not convinced it was such an easy task given to Gabriel that it goes from "Greetings, favored one" to "Here am I" in the span of exactly eight sentences. That's what Luke gives us. And I really believe it's simply the narrative choice to hit the highlights. How often do we go back and share every single detail of significant conversations? How often do we even remember all the words that are shared in those life-changing moments?

As interesting and foundational as this story is, I'm also very interested in what is contained in the statement, "she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." The writer of Luke's Gospel wouldn't have known what her inner dialogue was in that moment. But it becomes an equally important statement about Mary's faith as anything else that happens in this story. From the very beginning, Mary wondered what it meant to be favored by God.

And what Gabriel shared certainly doesn't sound like favor. He tells her, "You, unmarried but betrothed woman living in a very strict patriarchal society will become pregnant – not by your betrothed, but by God." You cannot hear that news if you are Mary without an incredible amount of fear and apprehension.

The law says she could be stoned. The law says that at the very least, Joseph could ruin her future. Biology says that she is going to be experiencing the most dangerous thing a woman could do – to bear a child into the world.

What if she said no? What if she didn't want to accept this "favor" and do what God asks of her?

I'm not sure church tradition wants to explore that possibility too deeply. It's easiest just to skip ahead to "Here am I" and not allow Mary the personhood, the agency, to make that decision. But I would argue that we can't really celebrate the "yes" she offers without holding tightly to the very real fear she was feeling and the possibility that she could have said no. This isn't the story of a God who creates a child out of nothing, this is the story of a God who determines that the salvation of the world will happen in partnership with a young, afraid, betrothed-but-not-married woman in a particularly dangerous time and place.

"How can this be?" isn't really a question about mechanics – it's a question about whether this is going to be real. Can this really be the life she will lead? The future that God wants for her?

It is. Despite the fear, despite the hurdles she will face – not the least of which would be convincing her betrothed that she didn't "dishonor" him.

Luci Shaw wrote a poem about what happens in that moment after she says yes...

#### Mary Considers Her Situation

What next, she wonders,  
with the angel disappearing, and her room  
suddenly gone dark.

The loneliness of her news  
possesses her. She ponders  
how to tell her mother.

Still, the secret at her heart burns like  
a sun rising. How to hold it in—  
that which cannot be contained.

She nestles into herself, half-convinced  
it was some kind of good dream,  
she its visionary.

But then, part dazzled, part prescient—

she hugs her body, a pod with a seed  
that will split her.

And then she runs. "With haste" she starts a different type of dangerous journey. Not to run away from what she has agreed to, but to go to the one who is an integral part of what God is doing, to her cousin, Elizabeth. Also the recipient of God's favor, also an agent of God's impossibility. With haste Mary goes where she knows she will be strengthened for the journey ahead.

It's there, with Elizabeth, that Mary will begin to understand the power of what God is doing, the truth of salvation that will reshape the world. That salvation begins with this woman's "yes". Yes, she would partner with God in the saving of the world. Yes, she would magnify the Lord. It's there, with Elizabeth, that fear is transformed into the life-altering truth of hope.

Because she said yes. Amen.