

## The Fourth Sunday in Advent Cycle B 2011

About every third Christmas card I get has a picture of the event we just heard.

Mary is usually depicted as an all dressed up fifteenth century Italian noble-woman in her stone villa. Sometime she is shown working at a spinning wheel.

The angel appears wearing an ample and diaphanous gown which always struck me as being aero-dynamically troublesome.

In his hand he usually holds a lily or an olive branch, a sign of peace.

Somewhere in the scene you can usually find a dove, a sign that what is happening is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but down below, everything depends on Mary.

Gabriel is not standing over her; he is kneeling in front of the girl upon whose answer he, and God, and the whole creation depend.

But as I read and re-read this passage something occurred to me.

Mary really did not give an answer at all.

The angel did not ask her if she would like to be the mother of God;

He told her...

That God had been gracious to her, that she would bear a son, and that he would be king of Israel forever. The angel did not ask her how that sounded to her and whether she would like to try out for the role; he told her...

The Lord is with you, he said...and Luke tells us that Mary was much perplexed by his words. She was a good Jewish girl, after all. She had heard about the garden of Eden and about how Eve had messed everything up by believing what she was told by an equally strange creature. Perhaps Mary did not want to make the same mistake, so she interrogated the angel.

“How shall this be?” she asked him. She wanted to know exactly whose idea it was and exactly how it would happen. She wanted to make sense out of what made no sense: that God had decided to surrender himself to flesh and blood but that he needed her help, needed her surrender as well in order to make possible his own.

“How can this be?” Mary asked, and that is all she asked,

But wouldn't you ask a few more questions?

Imagine ladies if this were you.

Wouldn't you have a few points that would need clarification?

For instance,

Will Joseph stick around?

Will my parents still love me?

Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned for being pregnant out of wedlock?

Will the pregnancy go all right?

Will the labor be difficult?

Will there be someone there to help me when my time comes?

Will I know what to do?

You say the child will be the king of Israel, but what about me?

Will I survive the birth?

If any such questions occurred to Mary, she did not ask them.

According to Luke, she listened as the Angel told her the barest details about how it would all come about, and then came her turn

to speak. It was going to happen, that much seemed clear, but she still had a choice...whether to take hold of the unknown life the angel held out to her or whether to defend herself against it however she could.

Mary was the only one in the history of the world who had that particular decision to make.

The Orthodox Church refers to Mary as the “Theotokos” which means God-bearer...the one who consented to carry, give birth to, nurse, and raise the Son of God. Only one person has ever been drafted to do that, but it is still hard to hear her story without hearing more than a little of our own.

We live in an era and society that rejoices in choices. We are the generation that can have it our way. We have all been told how it is up to each one of us to choose our own lives, But more often than not they seem to choose us instead.

Our best laid plans are frequently interrupted by life's plans. Any number of things can affect how our futures unfold... sudden illness or the death of a loved one; surprise babies, aging parents, and an unpredictable economy.

Terrible things happen and wonderful things happen, but seldom do we know what will happen to us. Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no:

Yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me or

no, I will not;

yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events or no, I will not.

If you decide to say no, you simply drop your eyes and refuse to look up until you know the angel has left the room and you are alone again. Then you smooth your hair and go back to your spinning or your reading, or your online games or whatever it is that is most familiar to you and you pretend that nothing has happened. If your life begins to change anyway, you have several options. You can be stoic. You can refuse to accept it. You can

put all of your energy into ignoring it and insist in spite of all the evidence that it is not happening to you.

If that doesn't work, you can become angry, actively defending yourself against the unknown and spending all of your time trying to get your life back the way it used to be.

And then of course you can become bitter, comparing yourself to everyone else whose lives are more agreeable than yours and lamenting your unhappy fate. If you succeed in this, your life may not be an easy one, but you may rest assured that no angels will ever trouble you again.

Or you can decide to say yes.

You can decide to be a daredevil,

a test pilot,

a gambler.

You can set your book down, relinquish your mouse and listen to a strange creature's strange idea. You can decide to take part in a

plan you did not choose, doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you do not entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body.

Deciding to say yes does not mean that you are not afraid, by the way. It just means that you are not willing to let your fear stop you, that you are not willing to let your fear keep you locked in your rooms.

So you say yes to the angel,  
you say, “Here I am; let it be with me according to your word,”  
and so saying you become one of Mary’s people, one more  
Theotokos who is willing to bear God into the world.

*“We are all meant to be mothers of God,”* wrote the medieval theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart. *“What good is it to me”* he continued, *“if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place*

*unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.”*

Hail, you who are highly favored!

The Lord is with you.

Do not be afraid...for with God nothing shall be impossible.