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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Year C, 4 Advent - Luke 1:39-55
December 19, 2021

Christmas is almost here. The children are out of school (for better or for worse). After this service, we will have our dress rehearsal for the beloved pageant, just a few days away. For some, this is a busy time of last minute preparations and plans for joyful celebration. For others, these weeks are hard - a time marked by grief or loneliness or loss, a season to simply endure. Regardless of how you feel about it, through scripture and song and, no doubt, chaotic pageant, we soon will recall the story of God bursting into world to draw near to us, in the form of a newborn baby, born in a stable and lying in a manger, surrounded by farm animals, perplexed shepherds, and adoring wisemen. This incarnation is God's YES to humanity - a yes so loving and all-encompassing that we can hardly believe it .

But this morning, on this final Sunday of Advent, our gospel from Luke recounts the final events leading up to this cataclysmic birth. It is a remarkable story of unlikely humans saying YES to God to enable God's yes to humanity. At a time when women were relegated as less than second class citizens, two women are central in this narrative. (The men are no where to be found.) The first is Elizabeth. She and her husband Zechariah, have been unable to have children, a condition seen as a disgrace in ancient times. They have gotten older and given up hope, but then the angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the temple. He announces that Elizabeth will have a son who will be John the Baptist. Then the angel comes a second time, this time to Mary, a young, unwed woman. Again, the angel proclaims a pregnancy and birth against all odds. This baby will be the Son of God.

Suddenly, these distant cousins are united in a sacred sisterhood. They each have said YES to God's new, shocking call upon their lives. Luke's passage appointed for this morning begins with Mary setting out with haste, traveling 80 miles through the dangerous countryside to reach Elizabeth. What must that meeting have been like as these two women greeted one another - one old and one young, both unexpectedly pregnant with babies who would change the world?

The Church calls their time together "The Visitation," and Luke tells us it lasted three months. A recent opinion piece* by Enuma Okoro explores different artists' depictions of the scene. In Raphael's painting, a wise looking Elizabeth has one arm around a more hesitant looking Mary and is holding her other hand. Her expression is one of "resolute strength and empathy." She seems to be suggesting that even if they don't fully understand what is happening, they will get through this time together. French artist Phillipe de Champaigne's painting has a different feel. In his depiction, the two women are whispering like co-conspirators

in God's divine plan. As Okoro says, *"The world is on the brink of a power shift that will shake up everything in society, and these two, unassuming women are literally carrying the power shifts within them."* A third painting, a contemporary piece by Janet McKenzie, shows two dark skinned women, standing close to one another but with their eyes closed. They seem to be reflecting on their own realities while remaining in solidarity with one another. And there is sadness in their faces, as if they know that the road ahead with these rabble-raising children will not be easy.

In their own ways, each of these paintings reflect the complexities of what saying "yes" meant for Elizabeth and Mary. Neither had what one would assume would be appropriate qualifications for the consequential roles they were to play. Neither could have been prepared for what was being asked of them. They didn't even have good reason to trust their source - an angel who appeared out of nowhere. And yet, they said yes to God and to whatever was to come.

In these final days of Advent, I wonder how we connect with this account of Elizabeth and Mary. Traditionally, the church has taught us to emulate their trust and their willingness to say yes to God, and we might find inspiration to do so. However, I must say that it is hard for me to relate to their experience of being told by an angel that they would bear a prophet and the savior of the world. The part of this story that I find most compelling is the "yes" that they say to one another in their presence and companionship in this pivotal moment. They have come from very different places and experiences, and yet, now they are united in the unusual situation they find themselves in. And they are united in their faith in God's story that is being revealed to them. We see their commitment to walk with one another through this transformative time of blessing and of challenge, strengthened for whatever lies ahead.

I see that same commitment in our St. Andrew's family every day. We celebrate God's YES to humanity that comes to us in Jesus Christ by our yes to one another, in times of suffering and of joy. That has always been the case, but it has been especially true throughout the pandemic. As we face another Christmas and new year filled with uncertainty, Elizabeth and Mary remind us that while the future remains unclear, we are bound together by God's love revealed in the birth we prepare to celebrate, and we are strengthened by each other for whatever is to come. Amen.

* The Financial Times, "A season for solidarity," Enuma Okoro, December 10, 2021.

