

Waiting in Peace
Sunday, December 20, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:26-38

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Last Christmas our children gave us a video doorbell—the kind that allows you to see who is at the door and speak with them before you open the door. It was a great gift, though there was one problem. When Dean installed it, he also configured it send alerts to everyone’s cell phones...everyone, that is, except his parents. This gave our children the advantage of knowing who was at our front door even when they were not at our home – including the time one of them phoned in a Girl Scout Cookie order from out of state because they had just happened to see the girl scout knocking on our door!

It makes me wonder: what would have happened if there had been a video doorbell at Mary’s front door? Instead of saying “Here I am,” would she has said, “Who is it?”

Mary had no advance knowledge of the angel standing at our door. Instead, as the story goes, Mary is called to receive this angelic message of peace...and to trust in Gabriel’s calling to her.

Imagine being wakened at night by a cell phone alert, only to spot what could charitably to be called a stranger. Like anyone of us, Mary would be hyperventilating in panic – frantic because according to her calendar, she had no appointments with angels that day. Do you think she would have opened the door?

But angels, unlike pizza delivery drivers, do not ring doorbells. They do not knock at the front door or announce themselves politely. That seems to be the general principle across scripture. Angels are God’s messengers, but we might as well call them God’s disruptive messengers, because they have the habit of interrupting whatever else is happening. They do not tap politely at the door, but instead barge straight into your life, often sending your well-crafted plans flying through the air like...well, like angels.

And when they show up, they invite us to trust in what seems impossible.

It is no secret that trust, of the lack of it, has become a singular issue in our culture:

- Two thirds of Americans surveyed in 2019 distrust the government and its ability to solve problems;
- In a survey before the pandemic, 83% of employees worldwide feared losing their jobs to a number of different reasons.
- Trust in the basic institutions of society: government, media, nonprofits and business continues to slide.¹
- Celebrities, not leaders from religion, ethics, government or science, are among the most trusted persons in the world.

Angels don't stand a chance in our world compared to Tom Hanks or Meryl Streep, the two persons most frequently cited as the most trusted individuals in the United States today.

Yet the story of our faith centers around trusting in God's message of peace which reaches across the eons, touching the arm of a young girl who has every reason to walk away from the angel on her doorstep. The light of the fourth candle of Advent recalls that we are waiting for a message of peace – and this year the wait seems especially long.

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

This is the message which invites our trust: *The Lord is with you.*

There's a remarkable television series on Netflix called "The Surgeon's Cut." It is a British documentary about four astonishing doctors. Among the doctor's profiled is a fetal medicine expert—he is a pioneer in performing life-saving surgery on babies prior to birth.

Each procedure, he has the mother place her arm the arm he is using to guide the instruments. He invites her participation in the surgery as a way helping her trust in the work he is doing. It is the mother's touch which is conveyed in these surgeries...and he tells them, "You will be with me."

¹ See 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer: <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>

In a similar way, God is moving toward Mary through Gabriel's words...the Lord is with you. But trusting God is not always easy. In an earlier story, Mary's cousin Elizabeth's husband Zechariah is also visited by Gabriel. Zechariah is also told that he has found favor with God, and that God was answering the prayer he and his wife had long ago believed would never happen. They will soon be parents. Unlike Mary, Zechariah refuses to believe what Gabriel tells him.

Even in the holiest of holy places the message doesn't make sense.

Mary, on the other hand, is not in the sanctuary. She is a woman of no particular significance. Theologian Renita Weems writes that Mary would have found those words odd and even alarming. The favored girls, Weems notes, were not the girls from small towns like Nazareth. This was the greeting for someone of a nobler background, not a young, unmarried girl from a backwater village like Nazareth.

Nazareth, code for "the other side of the tracks." In John's Gospel, Jesus' earliest followers found it hard to believe that anything good could ever come from Nazareth. It's the story Mary has been hearing her whole life, so why should she believe now that she is the favored one of God?

"Do not be afraid," Gabriel says. "You have found favor with God."

It's an awkward moment, to be sure. Mary's confusion grows as Gabriel repeats his message, this time adding the classic angelic introduction "Do not be afraid." As someone has said, the best time to be afraid is that moment when an angel shows up and says to you, "Don't be afraid."

As Mary looks into the holy, mysterious presence of his unknown visitor, she is confused, bewildered. What does it mean to trust in this message?

What does it mean for us? God sends to us a message of peace: "I am with you." We have many reasons to not trust – to send the angels away, to shut out God's invitation. Creating bonds of trust is necessary, essential, though never easy.

How frequently do we yield to the temptation to shut out strangers? We push back against messages that call us to deeper trust, either out of fear or a hesitancy that their message might be calling us away from our settled and well-ordered lives.

Trust erodes more quickly than sandcastles at high tide, and builds more slowly than a medieval cathedral.

Mary does not close the door on the angel standing before her. Perhaps she is scared, and unable to move. But there is something about the angels' words that prompts her to trust. The angel's words dance in her mind: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

In response, Mary blurts out, "How can this be?" Some see this as nothing more than her confusion, but others see in her response an amazing stronghold of faith, perhaps even a bit of protest.

Mary is well aware of the stigma that will be attached to an unmarried pregnancy. She knows that the whispers will follow her, that Joseph will be dishonored, not to mention the possible legal penalties. She will pay dearly for all of this. How can this be? It is the question that sticks with us – and as someone who has taught this passage to inquisitive and curious middle school students in the past, Mary is not the only one wondering how these things will happen.

"Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary is summoned to believe the impossible. Luke's story is a reminder that when unexpected messengers from God show up on our doorstep, we might want to consider listening to what they have to say. Mary does not shut the door, and instead is only concerned about the logistics. "How can this be?" she says. But Gabriel is not sent on a recruiting mission. Instead, he has been summoned to help Mary believe in the impossible, to trust in a message far more complex than we can ever imagine.

She is called to be the first to trust in the good news of the Gospel.

A more sensible person might just have said nope. As Renita Weems says, "That's certainly what you and I would have said had an angel intercepted us with harrowing news that God had decided to interrupt our best laid plans." It would have found her in good company, says Weems: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah – all of them pushed back when God called.

But Mary places her trust in the one who says to her “I am with you.”

There are so many reasons not to trust in this promise of peace. Yet the old, old story of God’s steadfast love shines through Mary’s willingness to yield herself to God. She accepts as hope this word of peace: nothing will be impossible with God.

Amen.