

“Imagine: Hearing from Heaven” (Advent Week 2)
(Luke 1:26-56)

• **“Do You Trust Me?”**

- Welcome to the next chapter of our Advent journey! Advent is a sacred season of reflection and repentance that prepares us for *Christ’s arrival*: we look back, remembering His first arrival, and we look forward to His return. We want this Christmas to be *different*—to not be about keeping up with the “crazy” of the world, but about getting our hearts retuned with God’s heart.
 - One of the biggest ways we do this is by *imagining* where the Story began. The story of Christmas is so familiar that we forget how wild and wonderful it is. Today, let’s imagine **Mary hearing from heaven, with this history-defining announcement from God.** *First, let’s pray.*
- When I think of the incredible story of Mary, I think of radical *trust* and *obedience*. My imagination goes to all the great adventures where at some point, you see the characters facing the crucial decision of *trust*. How many times do you see this cliché in movies where one person says to another, **“Do you trust me?”** I found a YouTube video called “Same Line, Different Movie” that showed dozens of clips of famous actors saying, “Do you trust me” with all kinds of different responses. Harrison Ford, William Shatner, the Rock, Robert Downy Junior, Millie Bobby Brown. “Do you trust me?” It’s comical how many different ways that line is spoken: sometimes, it sounds warm and loving, sometimes it’s desperate and dangerous, sometimes it’s even sinister—depending on who’s talking. And the responses range from, “Yes...Of course...Always...Implicitly!” to “I think...In theory...Do I have a choice?...No!”
- In Mary’s story today, it’s as if Heaven is reaching out to her saying, “I have chosen you! Do you trust me?” Salvation history hangs in the balance with this young peasant girl’s response. And we find that the reason she was chosen, the reason she is revered and blessed above all other women, *is in her response*.
 - “Do you trust me?” This question frames the whole story of the Bible: humanity chose to forsake God’s trust, they bought the lie of the Enemy and put their trust in themselves. So, God took the initiative in choosing one person, one family, out of all the earth, to rebuild that trust, to forge a Covenant partnership: He promised Abraham and His descendants that He would bless them and make them a blessing to *all the earth*. It’s a story of trust built and trust broken—always on our side. God remains faithful through every generation even when we don’t.
- 2 Chronicles says, **“For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” (2 Chron. 16:9)** So, here at the turning point of the whole story, God’s eyes land on this courageous, humble, unknown young woman, chosen for the most important role in history: to be the mother of the Messiah, the bearer of God’s Son, God’s covenant partner in bringing the Word made flesh into the world.

• **God’s Upside-Down Kingdom**

- Her name is *Mary*—named after the famous Hebrew character *Miriam*, Moses’ sister. **“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.’” (Luke 1:26-33)**
- How strange and how wonderful are God’s ways. In order to make His grand entrance into our world, for the King of kings, the Name above all names, He chooses this unknown girl.
 - When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple (in last week’s story), Zechariah was terrified by the *presence* of the angel—as any would be. But Mary is actually troubled by the angel’s *greeting*—because it’s so radically different from how she sees herself. The

messenger from heaven greets Mary like *royalty*, like one of the great heroes of faith in the Scriptures she grew up hearing. “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” It’s like when an angel showed up to scared little Gideon in Judges 6—the least in his family from the least tribe of Israel—and says, “Greetings mighty warrior, the Lord is with you!” Do you know the other characters in Scripture who were specifically noted to have found favor with God? *Noah, Abraham, and Moses*. And now, suddenly, Mary joins that list—*highly favored*—she’s shocked and troubled to even be referenced this way. What could it mean?

- Mary is virtually nobody from nowhere, a peasant girl from a backwater town in an oppressed people occupied by a vast powerful Empire in Rome. New Testament scholar Craig Keener puts it simply: **“As both a woman and a young person (perhaps as young as fourteen) not yet married, Mary had virtually no social status.”** Yet, Gabriel greets her like a renowned hero of faith. Because God searched for a fitting partner in His plan, and He chose *her*.
- Now think about this: how many people do you think can name the Caesar who was Emperor at this time? Maybe you remember the Christmas story, or you’re a history buff, so you know: Caesar Augustus. But how many people know his real name, or any details about his life? **(Picture)** His birth name was Gaius Octavius, born in 63 B.C. My guess is that most people would not know that today (I had to Google it). And yet, how many people, all over the world could tell you who Mary was, could recognize an artistic image of her, could say a few details about her life? Here you have this virtually powerless woman, who, millennia later, somehow became one of the most recognized figures in the world—second only to her miraculously conceived son. Of greater renown than most of the kings and emperors and powerful people who ever lived. *How did this happen?* Isn’t it surprising how God works?
- Mary had questions too! **“‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The Angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.’” (1:34-37)**
 - It’s interesting to compare Mary’s response to Zechariah’s. Although Zechariah was older, and an experienced Priest of Israel, his first response to a miraculous announcement was to say, *How can I be sure that this will happen?* When God says, *Do you trust me?* He says, *I’m not sure, I need more proof.* In contrast, Mary’s question is, *How will this happen?* She believed immediately it would happen—she just wanted to know *how*, because she knew how babies were made. Gabriel responds graciously, with even more surprising and wonderful words.
- I appreciate how N.T. Wright reflects on this: **“The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary, enabling her (as the Spirit always does) to do and be more than she could by herself...at the same time ‘the power of the Most High’ will overshadow her...God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power... Mary is the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God’s power from outside, and the indwelling Spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.” (N.T. Wright)** *For no word from God will ever fail.*
- After this mysterious yet powerful explanation, Mary’s simple response is one for the ages, cementing her as perhaps the greatest and most unlikely hero ever: **“I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’” (1:38)** The Lord is amazing, powerful, matchless. He stands alone as the Most High God. His ways are wonderful, and so far beyond our understanding. All things are possible with Him. And He has done everything necessary to bring us to salvation. ***The only thing He asks from us is to trust Him. All He asks for is faith.***
- **Preemptive Obedience**
 - Although she’s the most unlikely person, the reason Mary is the greatest hero of faith, is because of her *total trust in God*. I believe God chose her because He already knew *she would say yes*. Somehow, throughout the course of her young life, Mary cultivated within her a heart of what I would call **preemptive obedience**. She gave God “a blank check.” **She was totally surrendered and ready to do whatever He asked.** When He showed up with a surprising, hard-to-believe,

unexpected, sacrificial, life-changing calling, *Mary's answer was already, "yes."* Yes, Lord, *I believe you, I trust you, if you say it, that's what will happen and that's what I'll do. Even if it leads me down a road of suffering, I know who you are: you are faithful, you are good, and you are enough. "Be it unto me according to your word."* That's the heart the Lord delights in. God's love language is obedience. Jesus said simply: **"If you love me, keep my commands." (John 14:15)**

- The way to live in God's favor is to live with that kind of heart: ***give Him your unreserved trust, give him your total surrender, give him your preemptive obedience—Lord, before you even ask, my answer will be yes, because I love you!***
 - This is simple, but it's not easy. Life leads us through many trials and disappointments; the world and the Enemy fill us with lies; our vision of God's faithfulness can become clouded by our broken experiences. How can we cultivate a heart of trust and preemptive obedience? Only by walking one day at a time, one step at a time, coming to know God as He truly is: holy, good, powerful, perfect, all-sufficient, Love.
- Advent is a season to cultivate and renew our surrender and trust in God. In this season of preparation, let's sit with this prayer in our hearts and allow God to strengthen our faith: ***Lord, help me to deepen my trust in you this Advent season, so that when you call me to something, my answer is a wholehearted "Yes."*** Or you could pray it more simply, in the words of the most blessed woman who ever lived: ***"I am the Lord's servant, be it unto me according to your word."***