

YES
Randall Tremba
December 21, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Luke 1:26-38

Once upon a time the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The woman's name was Mary.

"Greetings, O favored one!" said the angel. "The Lord is with you." But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

"How can this be," said Mary, "since I am a virgin?"

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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In a dark and gloomy time, Mary and Joseph said, *Yes* when everything in them wanted to say and could have said *No* to a child that everyone in Nazareth would call illegitimate or worse. The inconceivable became conceivable and thus this story becomes a metaphor for our own lives. We take the Bible too seriously to take it literally. So we can see *virginity* in this story as a metaphor for the inconceivable becoming conceivable, the impossible, possible.

We can read between the lines and behind the story to see that in that particular context Mary and Joseph's child would be anything but holy, a scandal to all those with standards of purity and propriety. But Mary and Joseph welcomed the child, publicly named him and claimed him as their own. If you need a miracle in this story, that's it.

No wonder Jesus would grow up to make room for everyone at his table and turn his back on no one! *In my father's house are many rooms*, he would say over and over again. Where God dwells there is room for all—for God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. God's house is not in some other realm beyond this earth. It is here on earth. God's house is love. And in God's house there is room for all.

Jesus would grow up and embody the hope and vision of his Jewish mother Mary.

The story about the angels and the virgin birth would come later, much, much later and would be told not to convey a scientific marvel, or a freak of nature. The story was told the way it was in order to mimic and subvert the mythology around the birth of the Emperor, Caesar Augustus. The nativity story is not about gynecology. It's about mythology—truth deeper than facts alone can tell.

Caesar Augustus, too, or so it was said, was born of a virgin and called the Son of God, Lord of Lords. His birth, also, or so it was said, was heralded by angels and he was called the Prince of Peace whose Empire and reign would have no end.

The gospel of Jesus is an alternative to the gospel of Empire.

Caesar Augustus even sent out evangelists with what was called the gospel, or evangel, to publish good tidings of great joy for all subjects of the Empire. They would enjoy the protection of the Empire's armed forces as long as they were loyal and submissive.

Augustus wanted world peace and oh, by the way, would kill anyone who got in the way. The elite of Rome would live high at the expense of the lowly. The privileged would be pampered. The poor exploited. Enemies killed.

Jesus offered a different kind of Empire and offers it still today—the Kingdom of God, as he called it, where the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the tormented, and the sick are blessed. And, oh by the way, enemies would be loved. Torture would never, ever be justified!

There are two ways to eliminate your enemies, said Abraham Lincoln. One is to kill them. The other is to turn them into friends. You know, like removing embargoes and walls between us and our neighbors just 90 miles from our shore. If you're looking for a way to put *Christ back into Christmas*, that's one.

In a dark and gloom time, Mary and Joseph said, *Yes*. Their child would show the world that love is more powerful than hate. And in case you haven't heard, the way of Jesus isn't about being right. It's about being kind.

This past week I finished reading *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand. *Unbroken* is the story of Louie Zamperini, an Olympic track star who survived a plane crash in the Pacific, spent 47 days drifting on a raft, living on rainwater and an occasional bird or fish. He drifted into Japanese waters and was taken prisoner and then survived two and a half years of brutal treatment at the hand of his captors before being released after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Zamperini came home to Torrance, CA, emaciated but unbroken, or so he thought. He came home to a hero's welcome and a circuit of banquets, speeches and awards—a true national hero.

But the war didn't end for Louie. He was obsessed with returning to Japan to kill his tormenter, Mutsuhiro Watanabe, nicknamed "The Bird." At war's end, the Japanese authorities charged Watanabe with war crimes but after five years of searching high and low could not find him. Louie swore he would. He would track him down and kill him.

That dark hatred coupled with PTS drove Louie into alcoholism. His marriage crumbled. His parents and friends were sorely dismayed. What war and torture could not do, inner demons did. Louie was destroyed. The unbroken man was completely broken.

Resilience alone is never enough. We need something else.

As fate would have it, a young Billy Graham was in So. California preaching the gospel to packed crowds under a tent, night after night, week after week. Louie's wife Cynthia begged him to go with her to hear a man with a story of hope and redemption. Louie fussed, fumed, cussed and refused one appeal after another.

And then one night, he relented. He was at the end of his rope. Out of hope. So he went. And something happened.

Zamperini heard a word, something like this: *Believe it or not, there is a power greater than yourself that can set you free, that can redeem and transform any darkness into light, any despair into hope, brokenness into wholeness.*

Louie allowed that word to enter his heart. A light flickered. And just like that, Louie said, *Yes*.

Virtually overnight he was cleansed of his demons and healed of his addiction. He was transformed top to bottom, inside out. His marriage was rebuilt. The hatred vanished never to appear again.

Within a few years he returned to Japan to search for his tormenter. Not to kill him. But to embrace him with brotherly love.

Zamperini spent the rest of his days, until he died this past July, working with troubled, at-risk youth in So. California as a servant of Christ's love and as a devoted member of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, CA. Who saw that coming? (Not me!)

Mary said, *Yes* to a power greater than herself. Louie said, *Yes* to a power greater than himself. I don't know but I guess there is some nudging right now in your heart calling you to embrace what seems impossible, to allow the inconceivable to be conceived. What will you say?

It does not matter who you are; the angelic message is the same: God is doing something in your life, and within you, that is holy. What might it be? Wonder and wait in silence. It will not be what you suspect. Give it your attention. Let it reveal itself. Steve Garnaas-Holmes

This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. In a dark and gloomy time, Mary said, *Yes. Here I am Lord. Let it be. Let me be your servant of love.*

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HYMN

"Here I Am, Lord"