

Sermon preached at Soham on 24th December 2017 – Advent 4

Luke 1:26-38

What if Mary had said “No”? There she is, a young girl probably in her early teens, engaged to be married, getting on with her life, making plans – ordinary plans – for her future... and she’s visited by an angel. Not exactly an everyday occurrence! More the sort of thing she’d’ve heard read from the Scriptures in the stories of some of the great heroes of the faith. And the angel’s message – you’re going to have a child, a baby boy; he’ll be from God, not a man; he’s going to be great, a ruler, holy, and called the Son of God. That’s some ask! Mary’s engaged to be married – but that means something a bit different now to what it meant then. Then, it meant that she and Joseph had made a formal, binding contract which could only be terminated by divorce or death. They were not yet married, their relationship would not yet be a sexual one, and Mary was still living at home with her parents. To be an unmarried pregnant teenager was shameful. But more than that, she was engaged, and her fiancé was not the father of her child. He could divorce her for that. In fact, he could consider it to be adultery because it was a breach of the contract they had made between them; and the punishment for adultery was death. So the angel’s message entailed not only turning Mary’s life upside-down, but risking her reputation, her future, her life. That’s some ask.

So, what if Mary had said “No”? Because she could have. God doesn’t force himself on us, that wouldn’t be a loving way to operate. He deals in co-operation, not coercion. He asks, or tells, but we are free to choose how we respond.

So, what if Mary had said “No”?

I wonder how any one of us would have responded in that situation.

It is, of course, something that God makes a habit of. As we have lit the candles throughout Advent, we have remembered different figures in the Big Story of our faith – the Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist. There’s Noah, told to build the ark to save himself, his family and the animals when the flood of judgement comes. There’s Abraham, told to leave his home, his family, his country, and go to some unknown place which God would show him. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, promised a child in her old age, in order that they might have numerous descendants. There’s Jacob, who spends more time messing up, running away and hiding than anything else, but in amongst that wrestles with God and follows the call to return to land he had been promised and to the family from whom he had been estranged. There’s Moses, called by God to lead his people out of slavery, out of Egypt; to lead them in the wilderness as they learn to become God’s free people; to lead them to the promised land. There’s Joshua, called to lead the people as they inhabit and conquer the promised land. There are the judges – people like Deborah, Gideon, Samson and Samuel; the kings like Saul and David; the prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos... All called to pronounce messages from God, to call the people away from their sinful behaviour and back to a focus on living as God’s people. Not a popular job. There are Zechariah and Elizabeth, another couple promised a child in their old age...

What if they’d said “No”?

What if Abraham had refused to leave his past behind him and set off for the promised land? What if Moses had refused to repeatedly confront the Egyptian Pharaoh, had refused to lead his people, had refused to meet with God on the mountain and get the Ten Commandments? What if the judges, and kings, and prophets had refused to risk their lives calling people back to God? What if Mary had said “No”?

I wonder how any of us would respond if God called us to do something scary, or dangerous, or potentially damaging to our reputation.

Because the thing is, the situation now is just the same as it's been throughout the Big Story of our faith. God uses the ordinary. Ordinary people, ordinary circumstances. Mary wasn't someone particularly special. She wasn't a mature person, respected for her wisdom and her closeness to God. She wasn't some kind of sage. She wasn't from a particularly significant family or place. She was an ordinary young girl. God uses the ordinary. Following a God who is living and active – actually following, rather than agreeing to the existence of – entails becoming the person God has made each of us to be, by responding to God's call.

I wonder to what extent we follow God – listening for God's call and acting in response, expecting to have a part in the Big Story, rather than merely acknowledging that God exists.

Not only does God use the ordinary, but God takes people by surprise. What we are called to be and do is not always what's most obvious, or comfortable, or acceptable. Mary would not have expected to be visited by an angel. She would not have expected to become the mother of the Son of God. And the surprise wasn't just in Mary's life. It was a surprise in the Big Story too, because the message of the angel was that God, the God who made the world, was coming to the world – and not as a king or prince, not as a rich man or mighty, powerful politician, not in power to overthrow the Roman armies...but as a baby, in an unimportant village in a despised area of Israel, to an unmarried teenage girl.

I wonder how willing we are to be taken by surprise by God. I wonder whether we are open to seeing God act when that action doesn't fit with what we expect or want.

Following God, responding to God's call, entails becoming the person God has made each of us to be. It entails being taken by surprise, responding as God acts in a way that doesn't meet expectations. And it entails taking risks. Not necessarily huge risks like Mary was asked to take, although we might be asked to do that. But risks that involve maybe trying something new, maybe stepping outside of what has been comfortable, maybe being judged because others don't recognise the call to which we're responding.

What, I wonder, is our approach to risk-taking? How ready are we to obey when we are called to do something risky?

Because we do have a choice. Mary could have said no – as could Abraham, Moses, and all the other figures in the Big Story of our faith. But just think how different the outcome could have been if she had said no.

The thing is, what Mary – and all these others – was called to do was surprising and risky, but none of them were called to do it alone. Look again at the words of the angel to Mary. "Favoured one", he calls her. "The Lord is with you... Do not be afraid... The power of the Most High will overshadow you... Nothing will be impossible with God...". That image of the power of the Most high overshadowing her is the same image as the cloud from which God spoke at Jesus' transfiguration, and the cloud that was the glory of God when the Israelites were in the Wilderness learning to be free people after leaving Egypt. In other words, "You're not being asked to do this on your own, Mary. God is with you – and nothing will be impossible with God."

What, I wonder, is God calling us to be and do today? What is God calling us to, as a church? And as individuals – what is God calling each of us to, in our daily lives, our relationships, our work, our use of time and energy? Whatever it is, God's not calling us to do it on our own. The power of the Most High overshadows us; God is with us, and nothing is impossible with God.