

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

December 21, 2008

2 Samuel 7:1-11
 Song of Mary (*Magnificat*)

Romans 16:25-27
 Luke 1:26-38

Daring to Say Yes

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

This has been a season of interruption and disruption. First came the most damaging ice storm in decades, felling trees and downing power lines, followed shortly thereafter by a big snowstorm. Just as we finished shoveling out the driveway, along comes today’s storm. Meanwhile, the restoration project is close to completion, and the final throes of the creative process require a certain amount of upheaval: some of the hallways and offices in the Old Rectory have been helter-skelter as we drag furniture hither and yon, find new uses for old spaces, and prepare to move into spaces that are new. Did I mention the financial uncertainty that stirs up so many minds, or the disruptions of accident, illness, or quarrels? Disruptions are all around us, and they are uncomfortable, and they sharpen our longing. O come, O come, electricity! O come, O come, certificate of occupancy! O come, O come, some semblance of order!

But -- talk about disruption! Check out this morning’s Gospel. The angel comes to Mary and announces a great disruption in Mary’s life: she will conceive and bear a son; she will name him Jesus -- that is, the one who saves. He will be called the Son of the Most High, and his kingdom will have no end. Mary will conceive not by a man but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.

We have heard this story so many times that we may not be able to imagine Mary’s shock, or to feel any particular suspense when it comes to awaiting her answer to the angel. We know what Mary will say. She will say yes -- she always says yes -- because that’s how the story goes! Besides, some theologians claim that Mary *had* to say yes, that her soul was so pure that the possibility of her saying no was out of the question, that God in fact chose Mary to conceive and give birth to Jesus precisely because in her goodness and purity, she would be incapable of saying no to God. But I will take my place alongside the theologians who say that Mary could very well have said no, just as our answer to God can be no. This seems a good day to talk about our freedom to say no, our freedom to say yes, in the midst of the disruptions of our lives.

I have been watching trailers of a movie that opened around here this weekend, Jim Carrey's new comedy "Yes Man." I can't vouch for the movie or say that it is worth seeing -- I haven't seen it, and so far the reviews are mixed -- but I find the premise of the movie quite interesting. It seems that the character played by Jim Carrey is trapped in a life in which he is perpetually saying no. Because he has been hurt in a relationship, he has decided to hunker down and hide out, and to every invitation that comes his way -- to every possibility, to every opportunity -- his answer is always no. Nope, he's not going to do it. No, he is not interested, he is not the type, he hasn't the time, he can't be bothered, no.

The movie's turning point comes when he is challenged by some kind of guru to transform his life by saying yes. Jim Carrey's character makes a covenant to say yes for one year to every request that comes his way, however ridiculous the request may be, and the rest of the movie shows what happens when he unleashes in his life the power of saying yes.

I haven't seen the movie, but I expect that what makes it funny is not just watching the antics of Jim Carrey as he takes up flying lessons or becomes fluent in Korean or bungee jumps off a bridge, but that he is *constrained* to say yes, he *has* to say yes, he now says yes as automatically as he once said no. Theorists of comedy -- for instance, Henri Bergson -- tell us that one of the things that makes us laugh is watching human beings act as predictably and mechanically as machines. A clown runs across a circus ring and slips on a banana peel. The audience laughs. The clown, unhurt, gets up, brushes himself off, resumes running, heads again toward the banana peel, and -- we know what is coming, we know what is going to happen -- he slips on it again. We laugh even harder. Clowns and comics revel in showing us that doing the predictable, habitual thing over and over can get pretty funny. So it is funny when Jim Carrey has to say no, and it is funny when he has to say yes.

But of course that is not where freedom lies. Doing the predictable thing over and over again provides good material for comedians, but it is also the stuff of suffering and sorrow. Saying a repetitive, compulsive no can trap us in a constricted little place, but so can saying a repetitive, compulsive yes. I've probably told you that I tend to say yes to too many requests, and years ago as a spiritual discipline I intentionally spent the forty days of Lent doing the very opposite of what Jim Carrey does in the latter part of his "Yes Man" movie: I said no to every request that came my way, for that was my path to freedom, my path to fullness of life. I needed to learn how to give a bold and whole-hearted no if I was ever going to learn how to give a free and whole-hearted yes.

So I like to imagine that Mary felt no compulsion to say no and no compulsion to say yes. I imagine that she listened deeply to the angel from

within the freedom of her heart. I imagine that the words of the angel dropped as gently as a pebble into the depths of her pure soul, and that she took what the angel was announcing as an invitation, not a command. What would she say to the angel? How would she reply? Here on the brink of Christmas, on the last Sunday of Advent, we stand on tiptoe to hear what Mary will say.

The angel is waiting beside you, Mary, and we are waiting, too. Mary, dear Mary, how will you answer the angel's impossible request? The whole world has been waiting for this moment, and not just for a few weeks, not just for a season, but for generations, for centuries, throughout the whole long course of human history. How long humanity has waited, O Lord, how long we have waited for you to come in great power among us to set things right -- to find the lost and heal the broken, to bring good news to the poor, to give sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free, to bring peace to the nations and peace to our restless hearts. O come, O come, Emmanuel! When will you come?

O Mary, dear Mary, what will you say to the angel?

We don't just want electricity when the lights go out -- we want to see the Light of the World [John 8:12].

We don't just want to finish a building or to make order in our homes -- we want God to make a home with us [Mt. 1:23].

We don't just want to be financially secure -- we want to touch the rock of our salvation [1 Cor. 10:4].

We don't just want physical healing for ourselves or for someone we love -- we want to meet the Savior who brings eternal life [1 John 1:2; 5:20].

O Mary, we stand with you today because we long for our Savior and because we, too, want to be mothers of God. We want God's presence and power to be born afresh in our ailing world. We want the love of God to shine out from our eyes and to be expressed through our hands. We want our own little words to convey the very Word of God, so that what we say leads us and those around us toward reconciliation, not estrangement, toward love and forgiveness, not toward indifference and hate.

Dear Mary, the angel is bending close to you, waiting for your reply, and the angel is bending close to us, too, waiting for ours. Will we give ourselves in love to this moment -- fully and without reserve, holding nothing back? Will we say yes to the Christ that longs to be born in our hearts?

It is a brave thing to open oneself to love in a world that is so full of anxiety and hate.

It is a beautiful thing to make space to listen inwardly for God, when the world around us wants to cram us full of ego-centered projects and ambitions, with the din and distractions of shopping and entertainment.

It is a daring thing to say yes to hope, yes to new life, in the face of the world's despair.

When it is spoken in freedom, yes is such a powerful word, a word of acceptance and assent. Yes, I will take a chance. Yes, I will seize an opportunity. Yes, I will do the unexpected thing. Yes, I will open my heart to love, even if the cost is great. Yes, I will take the first step, even though I can't see the end of the path and can't possibly know where my yes will lead. Yes, I will say yes freely, because only in freedom, can my yes really be yes. There are times when love calls us to say no, but when love calls us to say yes, what will we say?

O Mary, what will you say to the angel? Help us to say yes with you. Help us to give birth to the Christ that longs to be born in this gathered community and in the secret depths of our souls.

I invite us to take a few moments in silence and to listen inwardly, as Mary listened, and -- in freedom, if we feel led to do so -- to pray in silence the words that Mary spoke: Yes. Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.