

Advent IV

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38 (the latter read from The Message)

Rejoice! The Cubs have Jon Lester, the White Sox have Jeff Samardzija, but St. Christopher's has Eric Biddy! Two weeks ago, Eric challenged us to consider two responses to the good news which may be coming to us from the desert. He said: "First, we need to be listening for the gospel in places outside of church and outside of the usual patterns of authority. Like John the Baptizer, the good news may be coming to us from unbeautiful voices, or from dangerous places. And second, as Isaiah is commanded, we must go to work in the wilderness ourselves, to the places of the world's pain and uncertainty, and there lift up our voice with strength, lift it up, and not fear." I bring you good news today from a place which can be very much like a desert if the annual rains are insufficient, and a place with much pain and uncertainty.

This morning I am going to share with you a story of what I consider to be miraculous developments in Ethiopia. As a prelude, let me say that the Old Testament passage about David brings to mind his son, Solomon, and his connection with Ethiopia. I won't go into the details today, but King Solomon and the visiting Queen of Sheba produced Emperor Menelik I of Ethiopia, establishing the same Solomonic line of which the late Emperor Haile Sellassie claimed to be the 255th direct descendant. That was one relationship that was definitely consummated!

But that's not all, folks! The Queen of Sheba also brought back to Ethiopia the true Ark of the Covenant. Yes, this is the same Ark that was the object of the quests of Indiana Jones. Contrary to what you may have learned elsewhere, that Ark, which is never allowed to be viewed except by two church-appointed priests, resides today in a building especially built for its safe-keeping in the city of Aksum, the 4th century capital of Ethiopia which was the site of Emperor Ezana's conversion to Christianity. Aksum is located in the northern Ethiopia highlands and is one of four World Heritage sites that Linda and I visited in June, the others being the ten, 11th century monolithic stone churches built by Emperor Lalibela and his slave laborers in the space of twenty years, the 17th century castles built by a series of emperors in Gondar, and the Simien Mountains National Park at 12,000 feet inhabited by hundreds of baboons.

If all of this doesn't sound miraculous to you, then I would argue that you need a reality check. Imagine the Queen of Sheba, in approximately 950 BC, traveling from an altitude of 7,000 feet across deep gorges to reach sea level, then crossing or traveling around the Red Sea and traversing desert lands to reach King Solomon's court and then back again carrying a young son, plus the Ark of the Covenant. And she didn't even know that she was on a mission to establish a new Solomonic dynasty for her native land! At least Mary was told in advance what her mission was, although it must have sounded no less far-fetched to her at the time, and was certainly no less daunting.

Let me transition to Mary by asking this question: Have you ever worked with a two-year-old? Does anyone who has know one of the favorite words of two-year-olds? Right, exactly. No, no, no! And that is a hard word for the adult working with the two-year-old to hear, but the "no" is an important word. Psychologists tell us that the ability to say "no"—to express that—is an important part of development. It's how a child begins the process of self-differentiation. We have to say "no". I am; I am not. I will; I will not. So, it's a healthy thing even if it's a frustrating thing at times.

However, if a child never moved beyond "no" to a place of "yes", we would be concerned, wouldn't we? Imagine an adult who only knew how to say "no" to things and never could say "yes" to something. There's a group of adults we call "Congress" that does that. But we would recognize that a child or an adult who is stuck in "no" would be a form of arrested development. A lot of complaining is like this. We complain about something without offering a suggestion for improvement. All we do is shut something down. We don't search for or find a way of improving things.

A lot of the Christian religion is like this. Thou shalt not. Don't do this. We think we're OK if we avoid doing the things we have been cautioned against doing. This may be dated, but some Christian girls used to say, "We don't drink, smoke or chew, or go with boys who do." We know the familiar "thou shalt not's": Don't lie; don't cheat; don't steal; don't hit; don't have sex outside of marriage; don't shop at Walmart; don't watch Fox; don't watch MSNBC; don't vote Democrat; don't vote Republican; don't have an abortion; don't keep a woman from having the right to have an abortion; don't! don't! don't! But really, if we as Christians are to bring the world together, we have to move beyond the "no".

Now Mary is one who had learned how to move beyond "No". We learn that Mary "treasured these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary had learned something about listening. Mary had practiced being what we might call contemplative or meditative—she had made time and space to tune in, to listen to messages and messengers. People are chosen, not because they're special, but because they listen! Many are called but few are chosen. Why? Because if you don't tune in, you don't get the message. Mary understands a real "yes". It's not robotic—yes, I hear you, God, whatever you say. That's blind faith. That's not a real "yes"

So here is Mary. A young Israelite woman living in the kind of no-place place of Nazareth. She is probably young. She is promised to a carpenter, likely meaning that an arranged marriage has been proposed, but they have not consummated this relationship.

Mary hears: "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you." Mary is shaken—what sort of greeting is this? Should I be suspicious? Me? A favored one? And then she hears: "God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. A child will grow in you. God will be with him. Your son will grow up and bring a kingdom—not of stone and empire and machinery, but a kingdom of God—a kingdom of justice and mercy and love. All the other kingdoms rise and fall, but this kind of kingdom has no end."

Mary must have practiced saying "yes" because she understands what a real "yes" is; it comes with questions, with doubts, with authentic wrestling. Mary asks, "But how? I've never slept with a man!" The answer that comes back is resonant with the creation story—"the power of the Highest will hover over you", just as it moved over the waters of chaos. The holy spirit will move over the waters of your womb and bring new life into being.

Now, at this point, any of us would have sided with Mary if she had said, "No," especially in light of the context. For a woman to become pregnant without a man in that time and place—it doesn't matter what her story was—well, one possibility is that her betrothed, Joseph, could turn her in for infidelity, and she could have been stoned to death. And another possibility is that when Joseph heard about this, he would say, you get out of here—you go have the child somewhere else. We'll just pretend this never happened. If she does that she is, by the standards then, a "used woman". Her options for sustaining herself—the most logical one—would have been prostitution. So there is tremendous risk in what is being asked of her.

But Mary realizes that "no's" are dead ends. She offers an authentic "yes". "Yes, I see it all now. I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say." And God's spirit enters in. Life grows—not just for Mary but a life that is birthed into the world—a life that's a gift for others—a life that grows up as Jesus, who teaches others to move beyond "no" so that new life can grow in them that brings healing and hope and justice.

So, when we are on the verge of saying "No", is there room to say "yes"—perhaps not as radically as Mary did, but as a way of turning a potential "No" into an area that looks an awful lot like "Yes"—a positive possibility in the midst of a potential "No".

I would submit that we have all done this. Not necessarily in response to a direct interaction with an angel or with God himself. But in some way we have been called to serve.

In 1963, President Kennedy visited my college's campus twenty-seven days before his assassination. That is the day that I began to make my commitment to joining the Peace Corps after graduation.

Off I went to Ethiopia as the English Instructor at the Gondar Public Health College under Dennis Carlson, MD, known as the "boy dean" of the College. A year later, Linda flew into town, also as a Peace Corps volunteer, and I nudged my buddy next to me as she came into view and said, "There's somebody I'd like to get to know." The rest is history.

This June, after decades of dreaming of a return to this amazing country, we joined Dr. Carlson and his wife Beulah, both now 84 years old, on their small group tour of the Ethiopian northern highlands. We knew we would see Aksum, Lalibela, and Gondar again, which was the main goal we had in making the trip. However, we also became intimately acquainted with what I can only describe as a miraculous project.

Ethiopia has four times the population it had in the 60's. A capital city teeming with too many people. Traditional farmers plowing their fields with two oxen and a single blade. Back and forth all day long on one hectare of land (on average) unable to guarantee food security to a typical family of five throughout the twelve month cycle of heavy rains followed by an interminable dry season. How must they feel—using farming techniques that have worked well for 3 millennia but which cannot work without three full hectares of land with which to work.

Stunted children facing a life of cognitive deficiencies, all due to malnutrition. Women facing childbirth with bodies too small to deliver babies safely, liable to end up with fistulas—resulting in their complete isolation from their families and communities, with suicide often being the escape of choice for many.

This is the kind of situation that can seem hopeless. It is the desert that Eric encouraged us to examine as a source of faith and inspiration. It is a situation in which few would be blamed for saying, "There is nothing that can be done. Where would one even start?"

In our travels the Carlsons introduced us to the work of the Kossoye Development Project, a project founded by Dr. Carlson. KDP is committed to introducing intensive, sustainable, organic household gardening among rural and low income people and to assisting the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Gondar in developing its horticulture teaching and extension activities using locally available resources. We visited demonstration gardens, interacted with KDP and University staff members, and became extraordinarily impressed with KDP's work and with the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. KDP started focusing on nutrition in 2007, and the early evidence indicates that stunting can be eliminated by including vegetables in the diets of the target population.

Since the June trip, I have said "yes" and joined the state-side Board of KDP, and Linda and I have just completed an intensive fund-raising drive to build a surface water collection facility on the University of Gondar campus so that its demonstration garden will have adequate water throughout the dry season. Please let me know if you would like more information about how you can help with this life-saving project called KDP. Just so you know, Grace Episcopal Church on Bainbridge Island in Seattle is a major supporter of KDP.

Let me conclude with a story “from the desert” shared with me by Dennis:

“Ato Seifu, a KDP leader, and Dennis visited the gardens by the Shinta River where the low income women are trained to plant vegetables and are given seeds to plant near the places where they live. The two men walked up the side of the mountain where several women have very modest dwellings and small gardens. One woman, who had been a sex worker and is currently under HIV/AIDS treatment at the University Hospital, showed them her chard garden and invited them into her tiny home. She had prepared some cooked chard for them and an injera. They took small bites to respond to her great generosity of the very little she had. Then she brought out some Ethiopian flat bread which had been blessed and distributed at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that morning. She wanted to share that too. Dennis was so moved that he could hardly eat what she offered. This woman earns a little money packaging seed sets at the University/KDP seed bank.”

That’s a woman who has moved well past “no” in her life. She reminds me of the lyrics we have often heard:

“What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.”

May this season of giving be especially meaningful for all of us this year, and may we all share the joy of the season with our families, friends, and neighbors throughout the world.

Amen.

[My thanks to Paris Coffey for inviting me to preach, to Eric Bidy for his inspiration, to Michael Bush, Pastor of the Valley Forge United Church of Christ for his inspiration and a goodly number of his words (imitation is the sincerest form of flattery), and to Dennis Carlson for his inspiration and for his story.]