

## ***Faith says “YES!”***

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

December 4, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Jewish Feminist Scholar Amy-Jill Levine shares a humorous perspective as a Jewish girl:

The Virgin Mary made me nervous. When I was a child growing up in a predominantly Roman Catholic town in Massachusetts, my friends informed me that Jesus would return the same way he had come before — that is, a Jewish virgin would be his mother. Being the only Jewish virgin in the neighborhood, I might therefore become the messiah's mother. Consequently, during much of second grade I was absolutely petrified that an angel would appear in my bedroom, say 'Hail, Amy-Jill', and tell me I was going to be pregnant.<sup>1</sup>

Make no mistake, this, as many of the stories of angels and divine figures appearing to God's children in the Bible, are steeped in fear and anxiety.

The ancient classic story of the Hebrew Bible, Jacob being confronted by a divine figure, wrestling through the night with them. Is it a dream or reality? Either way, there is fear.

In the disorienting moment as this holy messenger Gabriel appears to her, she says “yes”, ultimately, but this was not a passive or naïve response. Womanist theologian, the Rev. Wil Gaffney – she sees a danger in the tradition interpretation of this story, that Mary, afraid, submits quickly and easily. Mary, Gaffney suggests, exerts autonomy over her body and her life in the face of Gabriel:

Yet in a world which did not necessarily recognize her sole ownership of her body ... this very young woman had the dignity, courage, and temerity to question a messenger of the Living God about what would happen to her body before giving her consent. That is important. That gets lost when we rush to her capitulation. Before Mary said, “yes,” she said, “wait a minute, explain this to me.”<sup>2</sup>

We are steeped in the iconic paintings depicting this scene, a passive and scared girl, usually with a halo over her head. That yes that she ultimately offers up to Gabriel, after she gets some further explanation from the angel, must have been grounded in bravery and an appreciation that life will never be the same for her, and for her world.

Is that not what life is about, saying an informed “yes” to opportunities to change the world? Sometimes we need more information, sometimes we frankly say no, either because there are so many scams in our world that we turn down the opportunity. But here, here is a story that we in churches hear every year at this time, surreal as it seems to our modern scientific minds - come on, angels, God making a young girl pregnant with God's beloved, a holy child??

I'm thinking about that other story today, the prophetic vision that Isaiah was given to share with his people. A barren land, all seems lost, except, except for a stump – a symbol of hope. The people in authority of Isaiah's time had made bad decisions, and they were plundered, destroyed – often tragedies like plagues and being defeated by a powerful enemy were attributed to God's will, and it was said to be because the country that was destroyed had been making bad choices.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feminist Companion to Mariology* ed. Amy-Jill Levine © 2005 Pilgrim Press

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wilgafney.com/2017/11/26/did-mary-say-me-too/>

That image, of land stripped of its vegetation, brings to my mind our world today, Creation on the brink of disaster, we are told. Climate Change, proven by scientists to have been prompted in large part by short sighted decisions of humans like you and me. But that stumps. Where is the hope? Prophets of the Bible always bring a message of judgment, but never without just a glimpse of hope.

The Jews are still awaiting their Messiah. Luke the Gospel writer of this Annunciation story proclaims that Jesus is that Messiah, that is an interesting debate among Christians that I'll save for another day. Now, in our modern reality, we see more devastating storms, a result of global warming, and alarmingly reduced ice caps on mountains, glaciers melting, the most vulnerable countries of our world are hardest hit by the extreme weather patterns. It looks grim.

Where are the signs of hope? Many of us in Sudbury know about Sophia Mathur, the climate activist who led the demonstrations on Fridays that attracted younger and older alike. Autumn Pelletier of Wikwemikong, who at a very early age came to understand the importance of water, participated in ceremonies that instilled in her the sense that she needed to speak out publicly. She met with Prime Minister Trudeau in 2016, and she was rather forthright: I'm very unhappy with the choices you made and broken promises to my people.<sup>3</sup>

The Prime Minister said that he understood and that he'd protect the water. Her comment later was, "I don't think he should have made that promise, because now I'm going to hold him accountable."<sup>4</sup>

The hope in the midst of the destruction of God's Creation, often in the young people, saying yes to speaking up and out about important issues, issues that adults thought they were the primary authorities on. In the face of fear and uncertainty, it is easy and natural to want to say, "I want to think about it for awhile" or even an outright "no". Whether we are talking about Climate Change, or any issue that is haunting you, poking you, prodding you until you are agitated, this is not uniquely Christian, the fearful encounter that challenges, even scares you to consider, "Should I do this?"

But Mary, young Mary, she is not a hero because she is young, or because she is a virgin. She is a hero because, afraid and uncertain as she was, she did not turn away from that fear. She asked questions, she dared to express her doubt. Only then did she say "yes" to this mission that Gabriel spoke about.

In invite all of us to consider this story of the Annunciation, the announcement given by angel Gabriel to young Mary that she is to give birth to God's Beloved child, Jesus – to reflect on this story with modern eyes. This isn't a piece of fragile artwork, it is a bold story of Call of an ordinary person to do something that they would never have imagined possible. What a powerful, and baffling story. Holy opportunities to change the world, to say "yes" to the call to action bubbling up inside of us – whether it is the nagging pull to sign a petition, or a sense that we need to make a broken relationship in our life right by taking a baby step.

This week, in spite of the fear, face an issue, find out about it, be informed, but then dare to say "yes." That is this week's Advent work. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Geographic, OCT 21, 2020. Abi Hayward. <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/water-protection-and-youth-activism-with-autumn-peltier/>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid