

**Rev. Susan Hilley Niesen**  
**“Here I Am, the Servant of the Lord”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, December 20, 2020**

***Luke 1:26-38***

*In the sixth month 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 virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘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. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 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.*

Friends, will you pray with me? God of grace, your eternal word took flesh among us when Mary placed her life at the service of your will. Prepare us for Christ to come again and open our hearts to the work of your spirit as the word is proclaimed this day. Keep us steadfast in hope and faithful and service that we may give glory to you and live as your beloved children through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some four years ago, I had the good fortune of touring the Vatican Museum with a small group. It was amazing, a bit overwhelming. But the guide was terrific at leading us through the collection, giving us new insights into the artwork. As you might imagine, many of the paintings and sculptures in the Vatican focus on the Virgin Mary. As we looked at artwork from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, we could see trends. Painters brought a reverence to their depiction of Mary. My apologies. Painters would paint her with an otherworldly look about her, a sadness in her eyes, a delicate piety etched in her on her face, sometimes a halo, and frequently, a blue robe draping her figure, a favored color since the Lapis used in the paint was so expensive, a rare color for the woman exalted above all others in the Catholic tradition, Mary, the bearer of God. Several of the paintings of the Annunciation depict a fair-skinned woman in a formal garden or hall. The artist painted what they knew but the scenes are so very much at odds with the account offered by Luke. The Evangelist would not have recognized the Italian villa, the formal trees, the fine tapestries over robes of these paintings.

In the Gospel account, Gabriel enters the daily ordinariness of everyday life in Nazareth. He comes upon a young girl, most likely as she went about her household duties, an unsophisticated village girl betrothed to a local craftsman about to have her

life turned upside down. One wonders how the Annunciation might be portrayed if the story was retold in today's context. Granted, few Americans expect that a girl's father would take the initiative to arrange a proper marriage for her when she reached puberty. But if one were to set the scene here and now, we might see Gabriel paying a visit to the daughter of a modest home in a modest neighborhood, a young woman whose family holds high expectations of her and has raised her accordingly. Churchgoing and responsible in her after school job. A good student working toward a scholarship. A respectful girl. Who would expect a stranger to greet her as she turns away from her sophomore locker or waits at the bus stop after work, with this kind of greeting? Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. Of course, she is afraid, but her fear becomes confusion at what comes next--You will conceive and bear a son. She states what should be obvious to anyone who knows her, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" The messenger has a ready answer. "The power of the most high will overshadow you. The child to be born will be holy." She looks at him and weighs his words, her heart is racing, she swallows hard. No way to hide a pregnancy. Her family will be distraught, embarrassed, disappointed. Who will believe this explanation? Maybe she won't be able to keep up with school or keep her job. Her boyfriend will think she betrayed him after all those carefully drawn boundaries. And her church will think she betrayed the values she's been taught.

Now she could look at Gabriel and simply say, "No. I've worked too hard. I've got too much to lose. God can find someone else." But God has touched her heart and she gathers her courage. The resolve in her voice is firm as she responds, "Here am I. The servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." At her yes, the world is changed forever. God's kingdom is about to dawn, and it changes the equation for all times. Not long after the angel departs Mary sings a joyous song we have come to know as the Magnificat paraphrased in the hymn we just sang. It is a song of praise that reflects God's dream for the world. A world in which the powerful are brought down as the lowly are lifted. Where the hungry are filled and mercy abounds. It is a vision that will shape the ministry of the child Mary carries. Looking at the history of human civilization there seems to be one trajectory that is repeated time and again in place after place. Power is achieved through conquest. Society is structured around power. Some people claw their way to the top of the heap and others are pushed down to the bottom. This was certainly true of Palestine at the time of Christ. The powerful, the Roman officials, the puppet kings exploited the powerless. The majority of the population was left to eke out an existence bounded by faith and fear and poverty. It is against this backdrop that Mary sings. She sings of God's favor shining on those who are of no out in Rome's eyes. She sings of mercy and abundance where cruelty and deprivation have been common fare. And it has all turned on the yes Mary says to God. On the holy child she bears. So now we way to celebrate once more the birth of that baby. How many of us long for the light of the star to lead us once again with shepherds and wise ones to the stable where God's son is laid in a manger? How dark our world has been this year. How long the journey. How we yearn for this baby. We want to be wrapped in the sweet smell of fresh hay. To be captivated by the content of a newborn held to his mother's breast. Our ears strain for the angel telling us not to be afraid. Our hearts long for the comfort of Mary's lullaby. We are ready to bow down and lay the cares of our hearts at the manger of Emmanuel. God with us. For it has been a scary year, a year of loss and challenge. Many of us are exhausted by the demands it has brought, the changes it has wrought. Many have sacrificed. Many have lost all sense of security or possibility. The foundations have been shaken. The pandemic has turned the world upside down and shown us where all the cracks lie. We are more than ready for hope for peace for joy for love. We are looking for starlight, listening for angel choirs, and longing to kneel and Bethlehem for a good long while. Kneeling in Bethlehem will be a good thing, a restorative moment.

But eventually, we will need to rise and take a good hard look at the world we live in again. We will need to gather our courage, our resolve, and our readiness to say yes to God. Because Mary is not the only one God asked to bear Christ into the world. I think many of us who call ourselves disciples of Christ have been especially disturbed by the realities this year has revealed. We believe we have been called to the work of Jesus who began his ministry with words of good news to the

poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, and liberation for the oppressed. We are the church Christ called into being as witness to his word and work and commissioned to carry his compassion and mercy with us into all the world. And we have been doing that work to some degree or another for two millennia now. But when we measure the world we experience against the words of Mary's song, we can see how much change must yet come before God's vision for creation is a physical reality. And the gap can be overwhelming. God's project of salvation still requires the resolve and courage of God's faithful. It still requires our yes, because we have all come to understand that the kingdom which dawned with the birth of Jesus is not one ushered in by sword, not one built on worldly keys of power and wealth. Rather, the Commonwealth of God breaks into ordinary life in ordinary moments of human experience. When justice prevails, when Mercy is offered, when compassion overcomes tragedy, when structures of oppression are broken. Sometimes it is a dramatic event widely heralded. More often it is a quiet gesture, a kind word, an act of love, a shared commitment. As disciples, we live out our yes in many ways and in many venues. We have opportunities each day to bear the light of Christ. Some do that through service professions, healing, protecting, teaching, caring for others. Some choose to do so in less visible, less lauded ways that are essential to supporting our common life, maintaining our buildings and communities, growing, delivering our food. Some use their minds in service to the greater good and discover vaccines that deliver hope to a suffering world. Most of us move through each day with little fanfare trying our best to shape our hearts and imaginations to the example of Jesus. And hoping that the kindness of our words and actions, the resources we share with others, will make a difference in revealing the Kingdom of God in our midst. But we often wonder if it's enough.

And then there will come a story that shows what a difference it does make. Perhaps you saw the news accounts this week of Darian Cockrell who is Missouri's Teacher of the Year nominee? If you have heard his speech or seen the video posted on the Lindbergh School District's Web site, you know that his is a remarkable story. Darian was born in North City. His mother was a drug addict. His father murdered someone before he turned four. At 6 years old, he began cycling in and out of the foster care system and he was a gang member before he hit middle school. He thought he was born just to fail and figured he'd be like most of the guys he knew, either dead or in prison before he was grown.

But he found the lifeline with the voluntary desegregation program and a new school. His angels were teachers who really saw him, who listened to his story, and perceived his needs, and fought for him, even going to court to remove him from a toxic home situation. He found a mentor in the boy's home where he was placed during middle school. Ken told him it was okay to be tough, but also okay to be compassionate. He had a counselor whom he learned to trust. She coached him, building on his love of sports to include a love of learning. He had a football coach who adopted him into his family and gave him stability and support so that he could follow his own dream beyond the elusive promise of an NFL career to a real world, opportunity to give back through teaching.

Mr. Cockrell is a physical education teacher at Crestwood Elementary School where he focuses on building healthy hearts, emotionally and physically. The kids say Mr. D.C is the best part of their day, that he can tell whether they are sad without even asking. One little girl saying, "It's a magical power." I suspect Darian would tell you that it's not magic, it's caring, it's seeing children for who they are and honoring them as people of worth. He encourages his colleagues not to underestimate the power they have to make an impact. As he tells other teachers, everything we do must be in an effort to make a connection to build trust and to help children find success. It's a lesson he embodies, a light he carries.

Friends, how will you bear Christ into the world? How can you say yes to God's project of salvation? What need, what possibility will invite you to say, "Here am I,"? In these dark December days, be ready. This world needs God's servants as much as ever. Be bold, carry the light and love of Christ as you go that may all glory be given to God. Amen.

