

September 22, 2024

A Story as prequel to the reflection

True confession: I'm fascinated by people and, if I'm in an environment with a bunch of strangers, I tend to create stories in my head about who and how they are, stories that may or may not be true. It entertains me and keeps my nose out of my phone. Most times I don't get to find out if my assumptions are correct. But occasionally, I get to see the stranger on whom I'm focussing interact with someone and my limited characterizations are shown to be right or wrong. Many times, I find that someone's "resting face" totally belies who they are. I know mine does. When I catch sight of my reflection in a store window, I find I look quite serious and severe and I don't feel that's who I am. Some time ago, I was at Shopper's Drug Mart and I had my tiny rescue dog, Magoo, in my arms. I was waiting in a line and the wait was long. Eventually I saw a man come up to join the line. Based on how he looked, I made my assumptions about who and how he was. Based those assumptions, and much to my shame, my instinct was to steer clear of him. Well, God had other plans. Magoo caught the man's eye and he walked up to us to admire my pup. As soon as this gentleman opened his mouth and I looked into his eyes, I knew God had opened a door and, rather than steering clear, I was to walk through. The next several minutes were spent sharing our love of dogs, him sharing how in love with his own dog he and his wife were, and how wonderful his dog was with his kids – in my story there had not been a wife and kids and certainly not a family dog. He bestowed much affection on Magoo and told me I was a "saviour" for having taken Magoo in. The irony. Perhaps a saviour in one arena but I had been in danger of falling very short in another. We had a wonderful chat and I was filled with gratitude that I had said yes to God. Our encounter didn't change this gentleman's life, nor mine, nor is it alone a big deal in the grand scheme of things - but if every open door were walked through, if "yes" were always the answer to opportunities for showing each other respect and kindness, surely even tiny, everyday encounters would accumulate to finally bring God's will to our world.

Scripture Readings:

Genesis 46:1–4 (NRSVU)

When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “I am God the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph’s own hand shall close your eyes.”

Luke 1:26-28 and 35-38 (NRSVU)

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, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

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.

Reflection: Saying 'Yes!' to God

My best friend, Debra, is married to Colin Mochrie of whom you may have heard. Colin's television show, "Whose Line Is It Anyway?", has been on the air and in reruns for years. He is a very famous Canadian improvisation artist and brings the gift of laughter to people all over the world. A lovely calling.

The basic rule of the art of improvisation is to say "yes" – and, let's face it, life and improvisation have one basic thing in common: they aren't scripted. There are some guidelines, certainly, but we're out here on the stage of life pretty much winging it. In the context of improv, saying yes doesn't mean uttering the word - it means to accept and augment the ideas your partner gives you and run with them. It's creative expansion. Nothing good – or entertaining – can come from shutting down ideas. But you've got to be paying attention! You've got to recognize a suggestion when it's thrown to you.

Jacob was certainly paying attention when, as we heard in Genesis 46, he responds to God's call with "Here I am!" Jacob was not only listening, he was willing to follow direction. We heard in our reading from Luke about the angel telling Mary she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary's response to the upheaval that was about to come into her life was, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Jacob and Mary paid attention, they heard and they followed. They were alert and willing. Their attitude reflected what we heard in today's Psalm: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

But how are we, in 2024, supposed to know what God wants us to do and when? We don't have the advantage of God's voice booming in our bedrooms at night or of angels visiting to give us the lowdown. Or do we?

Every year, in the season of Advent, we joyously anticipate Jesus' birth. We say we *await* the Christ child. I think it's more accurate to say we *celebrate* the arrival of the Christ child for it's a story already told and long, long ago. The blessing of the

child who grows to be the guiding light of love, justice, and inclusion gives us much to celebrate - and much to strive for. As Christians, we spend the liturgical year following the story of Jesus' life and teachings. We describe Him as God incarnate, human but divine, and here for a reason as part of God's plan for us. In Jesus, God opens the door. It is ours to say "Yes!" and walk through, learning from Jesus' example how to live out this earthly life, to seek justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Because we humans fear what we don't know or recognize or understand, we're pre-disposed to reject those things, those circumstances, and – most sadly – those people, those "others" with whom we're not familiar. We need to answer a calling higher than our own fear-based instincts, and that is why Jesus' birth was needed over two thousand years ago and, humans being human, why it is needed still.

Psalm 119 says, "I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end." That is *saying yes* to God. And that is commitment to *following through*. We see, as we reflect on Jesus' life, that we are called to love. We are called to action. We are called to love in action. And we know it. But, God's message through Jesus – his message of sacrifice and unconditional love and forgiveness – is radical. It evoked a political and theological crisis in His own time and it challenges us today. We feel secure when our expectations are met, confident when things turn out the way we thought they would, when our "rightness" is proved. The ground is ripped from beneath our emotional feet when the Saviour is a helpless child, when value is shown to be in spirit not things, when we are challenged to sacrifice for others, even those who are "other", what we feel is rightly ours. Jesus evokes shock and fear with expectation turned on its head. And to follow what to us seems a radical path is scary. It is so easy – too easy – to pretend we didn't hear the call or notice the open door. The Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe has said, (quote) "The reality of Advent isn't that we are *waiting* for the birth of the Christ Child. The Christ Child is here and is waiting for *us to come*. He is crying out to us from the border. He is calling to us from the voices of the poor. He is shouting to us from prison. He is waiting for us to live out our faith. He is waiting for us to

seek justice. He is waiting for us to pursue peace. Let us go, for he is waiting.”
(unquote)

It is required of us to answer that call because, despite feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the need, we can make a difference. Saying ‘yes’ is sometimes beyond our will, but never beyond our abilities - because we are born of God. God is in us. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran minister and theologian, says, (quote) “I do think that you carry in your body the blessing of God and having faith like Mary means allowing yourself to trust that.” (unquote)

God whispers in our ear, God bellows in our hearts, God beseeches our minds. The scope of the challenges God brings to us varies: big issues with worldwide implications, issues equally crucial but closer to home and specific to our country, and finally, on the smallest scale but certainly not the least important - the seemingly trivial moments in individual lives that can change the quality of our days or someone else’s.

On the grand scale, we in North America have developed expectations of a standard of living that much of the rest of the world can’t imagine. It’s our norm. But starvation – of many kinds - still exists in this world of plenty. Can we aspire to so radical a gratitude for our blessings that it morphs into radical generosity? Can we give up having *many* comforts so that others can have *some*? Freedom is also a blessing we enjoy. The nightmare in Ukraine brings home to us the reality that to cherish that freedom is to help those being denied it. It is a powerful call.

These big issues require us to say yes to God’s direction. One way is via political involvement - whether that’s helping in the campaign of someone interested in influencing those changes, or voting for that person, or just making a phone call to state your opinion. The ramifications of even modest political activity can make a worldwide difference. We don’t have to be activists – just active. We have choices. We have power.

On the national level, we can acknowledge and make reparations for the injustices that have ravaged Indigenous peoples. Working to make manifest promises made towards reconciliation is one way of saying 'yes' to God's call to respond to the horrific revelations of unmarked graves.

On a local level, we can say yes to God's call via hospitality of home and spirit. Can we embrace radical inclusivity, enveloping anyone and everyone in our circle of care? Certainly, we are answering God's call when we work in Outreach committees, or as individuals, to support the Bethel Hospice, the Women's Shelter, and the Caledon Food Bank as you at Bolton United do.

When we see a need and fill it, we are saying 'yes' to God.

On the individual level, every day gives us so many opportunities to say 'yes'. I often feel that the journey to church each Sunday and walking into the sanctuary is a physicalizing of "yes". Certainly, there is no societal pressure today to attend church. Quite the contrary. But when I make the choice to come to church, it says something, if only to me, about my acknowledgment of and participation in my relationship with Whom I perceive God to be.

Clarice Lispector writes in her book, "The Hour of the Star", "Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said 'yes' to another molecule and life was born."

'Yes' can be as simple as taking time to stroke my cat before getting her off my keyboard. 'Yes' can be looking into a stranger's eyes and smiling. 'Yes' can be letting my little dog, Magoo, find kindred spirits.

The power of "YES!" can permeate our own lives and the life of our planet and all creatures inhabiting it. "Amen" is the Hebrew word for "Yes", for "Let it be so." When we lay down our heads to rest at night - or at last- may we have answered God's call with "AMEN".

Cheryl Stenson