

Christmas is the culmination of Old Testament prophecies and pronouncements by angels. Imagine that an angel came to us with news of great joy. First we would be incredulous – not unlike all the ancients who experienced a visitation of an angel. It is no wonder that the very first words from angels are “Do not be afraid!”

The angel Gabriel had come first to Zechariah saying “Do not be afraid! Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth (who was old and barren) will bear you a son, and you will name him John.” The angel told Zechariah that his son John would be great in God’s sight for he would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. Zechariah did not believe the angel so he was struck dumb until John was born. (Luke 1: 13–20).

The angel Gabriel greeted Mary in much the same way saying: “Do not be afraid, favoured one.” Mary questioned how she could come to bear a son since she was a virgin. Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon her so that her child would be holy, would be – in fact – the son of the most high. And Mary said: “Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” Mary said: “Yes.” (Luke 1:30-38). And so it was that Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem.

An angel of the Lord came to shepherds who were living in the fields watching over their flocks by night. It was a terrifying sight to be sure. But the angel said to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid.” They had come to bring the shepherds good news about the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem. An army of angels filled the night sky praising God for this marvelous thing that had happened – for God had brought to earth the one who would bring peace and goodwill to all people. This was beyond the shepherds’ experience, beyond human understanding, but their hearts understood what their minds could not comprehend. In haste the shepherds went to find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem. The shepherds told the Holy Family what the angels had

said, and when they left they told everyone what they had heard and seen (Luke 2:8–20). These shepherds were a rough and unkempt sort who were unaccustomed to normal interactions with people. They were according to Jewish law ritually unclean. And yet, they were so moved by the angels' singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven" about this wee babe born in Bethlehem that they sought him out and found him in a feeding trough. They saw this as a miraculous occurrence; they recognized in the baby Jesus the Messiah who was expected. So they told the story, the same story we heard tonight.

This was extraordinary news. The people expected a Messiah – the Messiah who would inaugurate an era of heavenly peace. He would be Lord – would be God in human form. And he would usher in the kingdom of God for all of God's chosen. So these shepherds were the first of the chosen! Everyone looked for the Messiah's appearance – but at some distant time – not then – and in majesty – not in a stable – and surely the Messiah's birth was not expected to be announced by shepherds.

All this had come to be because Mary said yes. What was Mary's reaction to the shepherd's visit? She treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:19). She tried and tried to find meaning in all the events that had happened to her in this 14th year of her life. Mary said yes because she believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the angel. She said yes to the Lord's message that came through Gabriel. So "Mary treasured all these words," and she treasured what the shepherds had told her. The verb to treasure is a very rare one used only three times in the New Testament. It is used in the parable of new wine and new wineskins in Matthew (9:17) where the wineskins are "preserved." And in Mark (6:20) it is used to describe Herod when he intended to "keep John safe." So Mary's treasuring these things in its original meaning really meant to keep safe or to preserve. It has come to mean then "to call to mind repeatedly." In the French Bible it says that "Mary kept all of this in her memory, and reflected profoundly on it." Likewise Mary's pondering is a rare usage of the word ponder. But we can be sure that she struggled internally with the meaning and the impact of all that had happened to her from the time of Gabriel's visit onward. Mary

is a model for us believers about the necessity to reflect on these things. And she is a model of the embodiment of peace. Her courage in saying yes to the Gabriel could inspire us to consider how we might help bring Christ once more to our world.

How are we to respond to the Jesus's birth – after we reflect and ponder all these things? After the birth of the Christ child we could stand in awe and wonder. But we have the shepherds as missionary models for us. We could return to our daily lives, or we could be transformed as were the shepherds who made it their vocation to bring people into a closer relationship with God. With the help of the Holy Spirit we could be the ones to carry God's divine presence again into the world by telling of Jesus's birth.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary, a virgin, in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. I want us to consider that Gabriel was not only addressing Mary, but all who long for God. My sisters and brothers, Gabriel was talking to us.

The angel told Mary about the baby boy she would bear and instructed her to name him Jesus. And Mary said “yes.”

My friends, we know that with God nothing is impossible.

So Gabriel is addressing us.

Do not be afraid.

God is with us.

Are we prepared to carry God's son?

If we say yes, we must carry God's divine presence in ourselves.

If we say yes to Gabriel, we must be prepared to not just carry God's son in our hearts, we must tell what he can do – and has done – in our lives – just like the shepherds did.

When Mary said “yes” she had had no idea how this baby would change her world and our world.

If we say yes, we must be willing to feed and nurture Jesus in others, as his mother nurtured him in her family.

If we say yes, we must be willing to follow Jesus up and down many dusty roads, perhaps even inhospitable ones.

If we say yes, we must be willing to wait at the foot of the cross with Mary for Jesus to die for us.

If we say yes, we must be willing to hold his bloody head in our lap as she did; we must wait at the tomb; we must cry tears of indescribable sorrow.

If we say yes, we must wait for his rising from the dead.

If we say yes, we must live as new people with the promise of hope of eternal life with God in heaven.

If we say yes and accept the baby Jesus – the first coming – then we will also have to tell of his going and his coming back from the dead – and then we must help to bring about the second coming when God’s kingdom will reign for ever and ever.

If we are ready to say yes, to Jesus being born in us this is the answer that we must be prepared to say: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

If you are ready to say yes, then repeat after me:

Here and I...

the servant of the Lord...

let it be with me.

according to your word.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.