

Rejoice
Ann Hatfield
Luke 1: 39-56

There is great joy in awaiting the birth of a baby. The miracle of new life lifts our hopes; the wonder of love fills our hearts; and the possibilities for the future stir our imaginations. It is a time of joyful anticipation and excitement.

With the birth of Rachel and Jon Frost's twins this fall, there has been additional excitement at Westminster. As you might imagine, there also has been a drastic increase in parenting advice going on. We all seem to know the best practices for feeding, holding, and comforting babies. Perhaps the majority of advice revolves around getting – and keeping – babies asleep. For sleep-deprived families, this is the holy grail of parenting advice!

Back when I was a mother of infants, we relied on a Graco baby swing. Actually, it currently is available on eBay, as a vintage baby swing with wind-up crank for \$250! Yes – “vintage” – as in antique! Well, it has been almost 27 years since I have needed to use a baby swing.

Thankfully, over those decades, there was an operating upgrade from wind-up to battery. Brilliant!!! With a battery, you simply turn it on, and let it run. The wind-up model, however, required much greater parental skill and dexterity. You see, it only ran for 15 minutes, before coming to an abrupt stop. Therefore, we had to become experts at carefully rewinding the swing, without waking a sleeping baby.

Despite my sleep deprivation at that time, I have a vivid memory of resting on a couch next to one of our sons asleep (finally!) in the swing. On the side of the stand was a warning sign: “Do Not Leave Baby Unattended.” Countless times, I moaned and whined at that sign: *He is not unattended; I am right here. I just need to close my eyes for another 15 minutes.*

This year, as we celebrate the third Sunday of Advent, we also enter the final week before Christmas. With the anticipated arrival of the Christ Child, this, too, is a time of increasing excitement, preparation, and anticipation. This morning, we celebrate the wonder and joy of this extraordinary season.

Today's lesson in Luke's gospel picks up the narrative just after the angel Gabriel tells Mary she is to be the mother of God's own Son. Gabriel proclaims, “*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*”

Luke describes Mary as perplexed by these words. Uh – yeah?!?!?!? Probably the understatement of the century! Maybe even the millennium!!!

I imagine Mary was FULL of questions, along with feeling startled and worried about the implications of this annunciation. Despite her fear and trembling, she holds fast to her faith in God, and accepts the role of Christ-bearer – Mother of God. With remarkable courage and trust, Mary responds, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

Wanting to share her excitement, Mary leaves with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Together, they celebrate not just Mary’s good news, but also Elizabeth’s approaching due date. Their time together is a lovely portrait of Elizabeth, pregnant – at last – after hope had vanished, and Mary, pregnant far sooner than she had anticipated.¹ For Elizabeth to conceive a child in her advanced years is almost as much a miracle as it is for Mary to conceive a child by the working of the Holy Spirit.

There are various understandings of how God works in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. There also are people who believe God is not directly involved at all. For example, those known as Deists believe God exists, but God does not interfere with creation. The metaphor of a clockmaker helps to explain this belief. Simply put, God is the grand “clockmaker” and creation is the “clock.” God creates the clock, winds it up, and then lets it run on its own. This is a worldview of God as uncaring and uninvolved with creation.

And yes – perhaps – there is a slight comparison between an exhausted mother winding up the Graco baby swing and the clockmaker metaphor. I admit, there was very, minimal, baby caring or involvement happening during those precious, extra 15 minutes of sleep!

Mary’s journey to see Elizabeth has deeper meaning than merely a visit between two pregnant relatives. The story stands in stark opposition to belief in a remote and uncaring God. The birth narrative of Jesus begins with these two women swept up in the glorious pageant of God’s redeeming and saving work. They both joyfully become part of the loving purposes of God – for the whole world!

The story of Mary and Elizabeth reminds us miracles of God do happen. For Mary, the gift of life comes as an unmarried teenager; for Elizabeth, the miracle of life comes as an older, once barren woman. Both women embody the desire of God to create new life – even in impossible circumstances.

Even before Jesus is born, we are witnessing God’s compassion, mercy, and love, through God’s mighty acts. God does not wind up creation and then step aside, leaving it – OR US – unattended.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 16.

On the contrary – as people of faith – we believe the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. We do not have the ability to ascend to God, so God came down to us – incarnate in Jesus Christ. As Mary sings the “*Magnificat*,” she proclaims a baby, who is the Answer to all the troubles of our world. She foretells the advent of our Savior. It is the long-awaited good news of the coming Messiah – a reason, indeed, for great rejoicing!

Elizabeth speaks a blessing to Mary – “*blessed are you among women*” – and in response, Mary bursts into song. She begins with words of praise and gratitude to God: “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” Mary sings of God’s faithfulness to her, and then describes a world shaped by God’s righteous and merciful intentions. She describes a world turned upside down. The proud will be humbled; the lowly will be lifted up; the hungry will be filled; the rich will be sent away empty. Mary has the eyes of faith to see that this great reversal is actually the power of God to turn the world right side up. *It is the power of God to turn the world **RIGHT** side up.*²

You and I know the world is not as God intends it to be. Because God will not tolerate injustice, violence, and greed forever, God is reversing everything: who is in and who is out; what is up and what is down.³

One biblical scholar noted,

*“We live in an age when power rests in the hands of many who do not fully embrace the reign of God. From the slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to the ghettos of our urban landscapes, the poor and lowly continue to suffer, as do all of us in our places of unfulfilled dreams and unending loss.....We all endure pain and betrayal that seem to rob us of any true experience of peace or joy. Yet in the midst of it all we have Mary’s song, which is an Advent celebration because it exults in the present and future promise of God’s eternal reign. It is a reign where our broken places are transformed.”*⁴

Have you ever wondered if Mary was the first woman the angel Gabriel visited? Or was she simply the only one to say yes to this messenger of God? Perhaps Gabriel had a long list of acceptable candidates. But one by one he had to cross out their names, as they refused to accept this bewildering assignment. How many women said no, because they felt too old, too young, or too busy? Mary could have been the first, the fourth, or the fortieth person Gabriel visited with this remarkable revelation. We do not know.⁵

But we do know Mary demonstrates an incredible openness to the work of God in her life. She trusts in God who is caring, involved, and always working in the world. Mary

² William H. Williamson, *Why Jesus?*, quoted in *Feasting on the Gospels*, p. 22

³ Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Gospels*, p.21

⁴ Thomas Daniel, “Christian Century,” December 12, 2012, p. 19.

⁵ Mary Lou Redding, *While We Wait*, p. 74

may not fully understand where her act of faith will lead, but she knows the journey begins by saying yes to God's invitation.

It might seem foolish to us, but God chooses to work in and through ordinary human beings. Even though most of us are unreliable, disobedient, and easily distracted, God uses us – you and me – to bring healing and transformation to the broken places in our world.

Although I can tell you how to gently wind the crank on a baby swing; I cannot explain to you how angels or the Holy Spirit work. What I can share is the power of God's self-giving love that I have experienced and observed in life. In Advent, we rejoice in the comforting good news that God does not leave you or me unattended. There is grace – God's amazing and extravagant grace – in every moment of life.

As we join Mary in awaiting the coming Christ Child, let her example encourage us to consider how we respond to God's call in our lives. It might never seem like the right time to say yes. We may have more important things to do and other places to be. We may not feel strong enough, because the burden seems far too great – too heavy – for us to carry alone.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth reminds us we are NOT alone. So during these final days of Advent, may we be joyfully surprised by the unexpected ways God comes to us. For God does NOT leave us unattended. Like Mary, let us rejoice in saying yes to the ever-fresh possibilities of God at work in our lives. And when God extends the invitation, may we – like Mary – courageously answer, "*Yes, let it be with me according to your word, O God.*" Amen.