

We are in the second week of Advent as we work our way toward Christmas. The story of Advent and throughout Advent, we are looking at the Christmas story, but we're doing it through the lens of the various characters within the story. Each week we're homing in on how each character prepared God room within their own life.

My family had cookie baking day yesterday. We started off the day running the numbers. We counted how many houses were on our street and how many we were going to make for the staff. It was a very long day. If you've ever embarked on making this many cookies, you recognize the pace of the day as a hurry up and wait and then hurry up and wait. So we'd make a batch of sugar cookie dough, and then we had to let it sit in the refrigerator. Then we'd make another batch of chocolate chip cookies, and they'd sit in the oven as we'd wait to make enough room for the next. We made nearly 60 dozen just for the record.

There's not a spare countertop or tabletop in my house right now, with much credit to my girls. Fast forward 10 hours and 700 cookies later, we arrived at the finish of cookie day. So all afternoon, as you're sitting at home watching football, I'll be knocking on doors, passing cookies out.

But you know, it's funny because as I was thinking about that experience in Advent, I was thinking that the core of Advent is waiting. So much of this holiday is just like us sitting after the batch of cookies have been prepared. It is hurry up and wait. We live in an age in which waiting seems almost obsolete.

Waiting isn't something we naturally do. Streaming services allow us to binge an entire season in maybe one or two sittings. Online shopping provides us with the illusion that a two-day arrival period seems like an eternity. While I'm grateful for the ability, like we did last night when the kitchen was a mess, to door-dash dinner and have it arrive within an hour, there's something that happens to our souls in a world of immediacy. This immediacy is doing more than just offering us convenience; I believe it has a formative effect on our souls. So when we arrive at a season like Advent, whose entire intention is meant to slow us down and bring us into this discipline of waiting, we find ourselves struggling with how to enter it.

The Advent season is a part of a larger church calendar in which there are various seasons or festivals to teach us different things. Lent reminds us, among other things, that God's way, not our own appetites, are the guiding principles for our lives. Lent gives way to Eastertide, and Eastertide is where we live a spirituality

of feasting and joy that's anchored in the resurrection of Christ. Then that gives way to Pentecost, which is this vision for life with God's power because the Spirit has been poured out, not only into the church but into each one of us as well. The year begins, as it did last Sunday, with Advent. And in Advent, God is training us to wait. The author, Joan Chittister, says in her book:

**Advent is about learning to wait...The function of Advent is to remind us what we're waiting for as we go through life too busy with things that do not matter to remember the things that do. When year after year we hear the same scriptures and the same hymns of longing for the life to come, of which this one is only its shadow, it becomes impossible to forget the refrains of the soul. Advent relieves us of our commitment to the frenetic and a fast-paced world. It slows us down. Joan Chittister**

How many of you feel like Advent, what we're probably more familiar with calling Christmas time, has us slowing down? Not many of us. Instead, this tends to be a season where it speeds up. It's the time that we're buying Christmas presents, or there are year-end projects at work or school productions, or whatever it is that comes at the end of the year. We race through Advent. We arrive and almost collapse on Christmas morning to then wonder how it is 2025 already.

We're not used to slowing down, but Advent is trying to slam the brakes on, forcing us to slow down one candle at a time until we arrive on Christmas Eve. This is one of the reasons that we've actually lost the practice of Advent in the modern world. We race right into calling it Merry Christmas, but the wisdom of the church calendar would tell us it's not Christmas yet. There are 12 days in which the church sets aside to celebrate Christmas. Yes, that is where the song comes from, by the way. It is 12 days to slow down and enjoy and feast. Christmas isn't supposed to end until January 6.

Instead, for so many of us, we live at a pace in which we don't want to talk about this Advent, this waiting; rather, we want to race right into Merry Christmas. But why don't we wait? Why do we struggle with this? There are, of course, structural things of the pace of life and calendar, but I wonder if, even more so, there's a sense in which we long to control our lives. And if the pace of life is fast enough, we actually have an illusion that we can control it. We have a sense of power over our days. If I just keep moving through life at such a speed, then I don't have to slow down long enough to see what's happening beneath the surface. If we keep moving quickly through Christmas, we can

suppress and push away the pains, the addictions, all those things that slowing down exposes within our souls.

Our hearts have been cultivated, not so much towards Christlikeness, but rather towards a sense in which we control our destiny. But here's the rub, what if we lean into during Advent. The growth and maturity of our souls into Christlikeness is not a fast work. It's measured not in days and years but decades if not lifetimes. It is in waiting that we learn to trust that God is working, not on our own terms, but on his. It's in waiting that we must come to surrender the facades that we hide behind and the illusions of control and release them to God.

This is why Advent is a practice, a discipline. It's one that is so needed in our age. As we look at the life of Mary this morning, we learn a way to enter into this Advent rhythm. Advent invites us to trust and surrender to God's actions in our lives. We'll see that in Mary's life. Flip to Luke 1.

As I mentioned, we're in this series called Prepare Him Room, where we are looking at these various characters. Last week, we looked at Zachariah and the work of silence. Silence and Advent go together, but yet it's broken often with songs of joy, as it should be. It's in Zechariah, where this silence was thrust upon him, in which he found a new way to encounter the presence of God. Now we're looking at Mary's life and what she may offer us. So, let's pick up the story in Luke 1:26. Six months have passed since our story last week.

**In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Luke 1:26-28**

Throughout church history, Mary has had a unique and contentious role. Many different streams of the Christian faith view Mary differently and approach her differently. I don't want to get into that this morning. I simply want to name that there is something unique to Mary's story. You see it right here in the text, in which Gabriel arrives, offers greetings, and says, "You who are highly favored, the Lord is with you."

It's in this way that we find Mary isn't just a typical character; there is something unique to her. And there's something unique that we need to take in and see as an example of someone we could imitate in her relationship with God. This uniqueness, this highly favoredness, sets Mary apart within the story. But what I find really fascinating is that Mary, being the highly favored one, is rooted only in the fact that Gabriel and God called her that.

If you were to look at Mary's life, it seems quite ordinary. She was a teenager, likely between 13 and 15 years old, from a small town of Galilee called Nazareth, which was so small it was said, "Could anything good come from Nazareth?" It was set aside

in this back corner of the Roman Empire, and yet here God arrives and says, "You are highly favored." Think about the circumstances. The text says that she was engaged to Joseph.

Think about being a teen in your own story. I don't think it's a stretch to say that Mary, as a teenager, which was the cultural norm of the time, was likely excited about her future. She's at the precipice of a new life with Joseph. She's got everything in front of her, and breaking into it is this divine disruption in which an angel bursts on the scene with a message from God. In all of that excitement Mary has lying in front of her, this voice of God interrupts and says, "Greetings, you highly favored one."

Have you ever had that experience of interruption? I'm guessing it's probably not quite the magnitude of Mary's, where you were going to carry the Savior of the universe. But at the same time, these interruptions happen. God often works through interruptions. In this season, in particular, it becomes so easy to bypass these sorts of interruptions. Because we live at such a pace that they seem just like that—interruptions—things to be dismissed, to get rid of, to overcome.

I remember years ago when my youngest daughter, who's now eight, was three or four. I was in a season where I felt like, as a young parent, I was just trying to grow in patience. I felt like I was incredibly impatient. I would find myself being irritable and short with those around me. So every morning, in my normal prayer times, I'd sit in my chair, have the scriptures open, and pray for God to make me more patient. I wondered why I was always so short with the people I love.

It would almost match every morning that while I was praying, my young, sweet Adley would wake up early. I woke up before the whole family with the intention of getting a little alone time. And so I'd wake up pretty early, and lo and behold, almost every morning, my little three-year-old would come walking around the corner.

Now my alone time was ruined. She'd want to climb on my lap, and I would get so irritated with her because she interrupted my prayers about being patient. I began to get really frustrated with her, and it took me far too long, a couple of weeks, before I realized this was God's way of teaching me patience. It was in the interruption that God was speaking. It wasn't something to be overcome, but rather, I thought, for all of my piety of the scriptures open and prayer, the interruption was God's movement in my life.

Have you ever been interrupted? For Mary, this was a severe disruption. God has a way of interrupting our lives. And the more that you become familiar with the scriptures, the more you come to realize that this is often how God works. People go about their own business, being interrupted by God's intervention, and the trajectory of their life shifts in such a way that a new path opens up before them.

The invitation before us this Advent season might be to cultivate enough margin to pay attention to the interruptions. Could it be that God is interrupting, breaking into your life in a way that seems like irritation but is a holy disruption? What if God is inviting you into something different? Let's read on and see how Mary responds.

*"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what greeting this might be" (v. 29).* This is the normal reaction when an angel shows up and disrupts you. Mary acted accordingly. *"But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God'" (v. 30).* I love that the angel assures her now twice of her standing with God. It isn't just that God interrupts to disrupt and cause chaos but rather interrupts and reminds Mary twice that she has found favor with God.

**You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." vv. 31-33**

That long description of who will be inside Mary's womb, harkens back to the prophets of the Old Testament that Mary would have likely memorized. She would have grown up hearing of those prophecies. And here, at this moment, the angel is declaring, "You will conceive a son who is the fulfillment of all of those things." Imagine the way her mind was probably spinning. Imagine the way her mind was thinking through the many centuries before in which she heard about a coming Messiah. She's beginning to think that God could be choosing her. *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" (v. 34).* That's a valid question.

**The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." vv. 35-37**

Note Mary's curiosity. It's important, as we consider the divine interruptions and disruptions that come to us, that our response be one of curiosity. We could ask how this could be since: This doesn't align with the way my life is going. This doesn't align with the story I'm living. This doesn't align with everything I know about the world. And so Mary gets curious and says, "God, how could this be?"

Most of us have a path of life in which it's directed by us. We have that illusion of control in which we assume everything will move a certain way, but what happens when the interruption breaks in? Do you get irritated and frustrated, or are you curious? Mary

gets curious. "How can this be?" And the angel says, "The Holy Spirit will come on you and overshadow you."

This is a beautiful phrase. Most scholars suggest that this phrase has all sorts of illusions, and it points to other areas in scripture, but the two that seem most clear are Pentecost and Creation.

## **Pentecost**

It points to Pentecost, which is to come after Jesus is killed, resurrected, and ascends into heaven. In Acts, when the disciples are preaching, and there's this gathering, it says the Holy Spirit fell on the people. It's a unique way in which the presence and the Holy Spirit descended, rerouting the trajectory of the church forever.

## **Creation**

It also points back to creation. I believe what Gabriel is saying to Mary is that the same Spirit that brought life and light out of darkness in Genesis 1, is also coming and going to generate life inside her. In Genesis 1, it talks about how the earth was formless and void. The Hebrew phrase for that is *Tohu Va Vohu*, which means formless and void. But think of it more in terms of utter chaos, formless, and the text says in Genesis 1:2 that the *Ruach* of God, that is the Hebrew word for spirit, which, if you were to translate that word into Greek, would be the same word you see here, *pneuma*. The Spirit of God was hovering over the *Tohu Va Vohu*.

Mary hears these words, and I believe Gabriel is saying that the same Spirit that brought order and life and beauty and all of the created universe out of nothing is now creating a new life within her. But not only new life. Jesus is the inauguration of the new creation. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see the world burst from that moment, all created order, beautiful and perfect and flourishing, and all of this life and vitality.

Yet in Genesis 3, sin enters the world, and it's utterly broken. Something fractures in which you see this spiral where the good flourishing creation is now infected with this disease called sin. And from that comes all sorts of destruction. But God still said at the end of Genesis 3 that there would come someone who would set the world to rights. Well, that someone is here.

Gabriel looks at this teenage girl and says that the same Spirit that was hovering over that chaos is now going to dwell on you. The seedbed of what is coming is right there within your womb. Mary is caught up in a story much larger than herself. From Genesis to Revelation, the story is about God recruiting and bringing people into his grand work of reconciling all of creation. And Mary hears those words, "You highly favored one." God says that the same Spirit will cover Mary. It will overshadow her. It will envelop her. God is recruiting Mary into a much larger story.

The good news for you and me is that when we are attentive to the interruptions of God, when we get curious like Mary did, our story, too, is wrapped up in God's story. Just like Mary said that

no word from God will ever fail. The same is true of you and I. What God has spoken over us: we are the children loved by God who will never fail. You, too, are caught up in this story. You, too, are invited into what God is doing at a cosmic grand scale. That somehow, mysteriously, your life, my life, finds a place within this grand narrative. God is saying that we are welcome into this story.

Look at the way Mary responds in verse 38. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'* Then the angel left her." The Christmas song asks, "Mary, did you know." And not to play spoiler, but she knew, she knew quite a bit about that. I've often wondered about this particular moment. I've wondered if she understood that when she said, "I'm the Lord's servant," all that would take place in the next nine months. What we find about this blessing of Mary being the favored one is that it would come with a lot of difficulty.

She was engaged to be married. She wasn't married yet. Which meant this teenage girl, maybe four months down the road, would begin to show. Her stomach would grow, it would extend, and the sneers and the shame that would come as she was walking about her everyday life, the accusations, the questions, the doubts, all of those would be thrown on her. I can't help but think, when she said, "I'm the Lord's servant," if she foresaw all of the trouble of what it meant to be the favored one.

Most of us have this view of the favored one that's nothing more than an American ideal. We assume that blessing means success. Blessing means recognition. Blessing means good health. It means status. It means promotions. Yet here at the very heart of what we find with Mary is that to be the blessed one meant she was going to have to carry shame. She was going to have to carry brokenness. She was going to have to walk through this, and it was going to look a whole lot different than she had anticipated. It was going to raise questions about her status with Joseph. Her community would likely result not in honor but in shame.

It's a strange blessing. This is the scandal of Advent. It brought with it not ideals or goals that we would strive for and succeed in, but rather, for Mary, God's favored blessed one, she would carry and deliver a child out of wedlock. She would endure the shame and the scorn of others.

You see, acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God's blessing. The story is so familiar, but we let its familiarity mask the scandal that's right beneath the surface. Church, you and I will have to endure if we step into this story. If we, like Mary, surrender and trust the work of God, it will likely cost us much in this life.

But as that quote we read earlier said, Advent reminds us that this life is nothing but a shadow of the one to come. It is pointing towards a greater reality. To accept this position, to enter into the story of God, it will bring about a lot of *Tohu Va Vohu*—chaos,

formlessness, void, and seemingly nothingness. But the promise post-Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit will overshadow and envelop you. Whatever the nine months held for Mary, God was present and with her in a unique way due to the connection between a mother and son, which is unique and different. There's an intimacy that Mary experienced with God that would be far different than what you and I typically experience or understand.

What we find with Mary and her response is two postures, which will become the two invitations for you and me today. The first posture is one of surrender. Mary, whether or not she had totally understood everything to come, simply said, "I am the Lord's servant," And she yielded everything: her future, her hopes, her expectations. It was an interruption that dramatically rerouted her entire life. Yet she took the posture of surrender.

More than just surrendering, she also stepped into a trusting relationship. Her second phrase, "May your word to me be fulfilled." There was a step of trust. She was yielding. She was surrendering everything she was to God. She also trusted that God's word would be fulfilled and come to pass. It would not fail. And these two postures of surrender and trust are the two invitations for us today. I want to look at each one. Let's start with trust, and then we'll get to surrender.

### **Invitation to Trust**

The first invitation of Advent for us is the invitation to trust. For Mary, the road was filled with stumbling blocks. It's hard to even wrap our heads around her willingness to trust, yet it meant something. She would have to endure that road, but she was trusting the God who would be present. Part of our failure to trust God falls into two categories.

### **Distorted View of Ourselves**

It begins with us thinking too little of ourselves. We feel like there's no way God would want to partner with us. We buy the myth that we're too broken, sinful, and flawed. It can take the form, if we're not careful, of false humility. "God, who am I that you could use me?" So we have this distorted, improper view of who we are, and that causes us to hide from God. We hide behind that because we worry the interruption might be so significant that God can't use us because we are too broken.

The problem with that is literally the entire scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, God is continually using broken, sinful, simple, and humble people over and over again. We have to see ourselves properly, which doesn't mean always thinking too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves, but rather seeing ourselves through the eyes of God.

We are the beloved children of God. Brennan Manning, a priest who struggled with alcoholism throughout his entire life, would often say, "God loves you as you are, not as you should be, because no one is as they should be." Church, you are not too

broken, you are not too sinful, and you are not too flawed. God is in the business of using people who are, in fact, those things. But that is God's M.O.

### **Distorted View Of God**

This leads us to the second reason we don't trust. We have a distorted view of God. Not only do we have a distorted view of ourselves, but we have somewhere picked up this message that God is an angry tyrant in the sky who only wants to use perfect people. He's simply waiting for us to screw up. He's some sort of tyrannical maniac that's looking down on us, tallying our sins and right actions, and weighing the scales on if he should utilize us.

Advent reminds us that God is, in fact, love, but not a distant removed love. Advent reminds us that God is entering into the story. Advent is about the realization that God is not up in the heavens, angry at us, but rather, he is imminent. He's in our neighborhoods. He's present and available here. He is love made manifest in human flesh to enter the story.

He's present amongst all of the world's depravity, violence, and corruption. The enunciation here to Mary is ultimately an announcement of hope for all of humankind. It is that God has not abandoned us because of the consequences of our own sinfulness, but rather, God is moving toward us and welcoming us into his presence.

God sent Jesus as our Deliverer. This is the scandal of Advent. When everything in the world tells us we should be distant from God, he moves closer. I'm reminded of Jesus in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, where he begins by pronouncing blessing—blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted.

The gospel is the pronouncement that through Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near, and all those who we'd think aren't blessed are blessed in the kingdom of God. Whether you think you are too sinful or broken, whether you're filled with simple patterns and habits, you're too frail; you're too unworthy, you struggle, whatever it is, that's the exact person whom God constantly loves and has declared blessed, not because of what we have done, but because God names that over us.

God is looking not for people with their act together but people who will willingly accept the invitation and trust that what God says about them is true. So the invitation of the scandal of Advent is to trust that God's movement in the world is also for us, that we can trust this God.

### **Invitation To Surrender**

The second invitation, and the reason we did it in this order, is because the invitation to surrender is wrapped up in that concept of trust. I'd imagine that Mary had all sorts of plans. She's

at the beginning of her life. Everything is in front of her. And yet, when she says, "I am the Lord's servant," she humbly yields to the movement and plan of God when it probably didn't make sense. When Mary hears that pronouncement, she surrenders everything to God by saying yes.

The invitation from God to us is similar to Mary's. The invitation for us is to surrender, yield, give up, and release control. So much of the spiritual life and learning to grow in Christlikeness is simply that. It's releasing the illusion of control. Do we have enough faith that we surrender and say, "God, I can't do anything?"

You become aware that you're not in control, and release it. But if you're like me, my surrenders are often half surrenders, partial surrenders: Yes, God, I give you my allegiance, but I'm going to hold on to my relationship. Yes, God, I give you my heart and my faith, yet I don't know if I quite trust you with my children. Yes, God, I believe that you're calling me to this or that, but I'm going to hold onto my finances because there's some security there. God, yes, I yield to who you are, but you couldn't possibly touch my sexuality. I'll take care of that. I trust that I want to walk with you, yet I'm going to hold on to the vocation and the calling that's on my life.

The question that Mary poses for us is to what degree have we surrendered our life to God? We know the answer is to surrender. We know that in our hearts, but that doesn't get to the point. In reality, where are the areas you are holding onto? Where are the spaces you wouldn't dare invite God into? You can have the religious experience, but you don't let God touch this or that. But to surrender is far more than just compliance and behavior. It isn't just telling God that you'll do what he asks and then begrudgingly surrender about something much more. David Benner writes in his book:

**Those who surrender obey. But not all who obey surrender. It is quite easy to obey God for the wrong reasons. What God desires is submission of our heart and will, not simply compliance in our behavior. David Benner**

Do you see the difference? The difference lies in the fact that my children can submit to the behavior I desire to see. But ultimately, in my healthy parenting moments, that's not what I desire. I desire for them to live a life in congruence with God, which I believe will bring about this maturity of the soul. So, it isn't just about changing behavior. It's rather the submission of heart and will. I can't control the way in which they respond in the same way God can. You can obey for the wrong reasons and miss the point entirely.

For Mary, yielding and surrendering are not just of compliance. I do not believe God would have forced that situation to happen, but rather, Mary yields and offers her whole life. "I am the Lord's servant." It's a submission not in compliance. It's a submission of the heart and the will of Mary to say there is something that God

is doing that I want to find my way into. This is the scandalous interruption of Advent church.

Whatever you are facing, Whatever circumstances, whatever pain, whatever shame, whatever sin, whatever brokenness, whatever it is, Advent and the example of Mary reminds us that God is breaking into all of it. I can't promise that the circumstances you desire so much to change will change this side of resurrection. I can't promise that the road to submission, surrender, and yielding to God will be easy. It will likely not. It wasn't for Mary or for almost all of the disciples of Jesus before us. The promise of Advent is that the impossible is happening.

God, who is love, became human. God is in the manger entering the whole of our experience. Advent is about the radical eminence of God right in the midst of brokenness. He is here. So whatever the circumstance, whatever the Tohu Va Vohu you're facing, whatever that chaos, God is present. Our task is to surrender and yield to the presence of God, to release the illusion of control, and to accept that God might be interrupting our lives in a new way. Advent invites us to trust and surrender to God's actions in our lives.

I want to lead us in a prayer time where God may be inviting you to surrender some area of your life that you might not be comfortable with. My guess is when I listed those things earlier, something popped into your mind. Whether it's control, worry, money, or relationships, your future, the sins you're harboring, the security you desire, the brokenness you have, the disappointments that you've burdened and the hopes that you long for, I'm guessing God has highlighted something for you this morning.

So, I want to lead us through that. Just like Zachariah stepped into the silence last week, I want to create a little bit of room for you to be still before God. It can be easy to get moving so fast through the season that when we come to a time of stillness, all sorts of things buzz up to the surface. As that happens, even now, would you consider that maybe God is trying to interrupt you? As you consider the invitation to surrender and trust God's movement in your life this season, hold whatever it might be that you haven't surrendered to God. What would it look like to name those before God now?

As you hold that with the Lord, I invite you in your mind or under your breath to say, "Lord, I surrender that to you." Maybe it's repeating that prayer of Mary, "Lord, I am your servant." To close, I want to invite you to read this prayer from Saint Ignatius—a prayer of surrender.

**Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will.**

**All that I am and all that I possess, you have given me: I surrender it all to you to be disposed of according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace; with these, I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more. Saint Ignatius**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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