

*"For Those Who Say 'Yes!'..."*

*Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:1-20*

*Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

The choice is simple, really. To say "Yes!" or "No!" The choice at Christmas is to say "Yes!" or "No!" to God. And for those who say "Yes!" nothing is ever the same again.

The Rev. Dr. Ira Zepp forever taught me the importance of "Yes!" As my college professor and mentor he took incredible interest in his students and rejoiced in our successes; especially those of us—and under his tutelage, there were many—that entered ordained ministry. From time to time he would write us a note that simply said "Yes!" Sometimes I knew exactly what it referred to, and sometimes not. The first few times it happened it struck me as odd and purposeless. "SAY something to me," I felt. But Ira was saying everything.

Tonight, so is God! The Bethlehem baby is God's "Yes!" to the world. In spite of all the complexity, uncertainty and fear, God's "Yes!" is that the world is worth redeeming. WE are worth redeeming. Valuable enough that God comes in person.

Yet "Yes!" is not always simple, for God or for us. Despite our desire for simplicity, we sometimes recoil when presented with a simple "yes" or "no." Both require total commitment. We seek to hedge our bets, to beg off if the going gets tough. "There must be more to it than this, pastor," argues our fear.

It was no different for Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, who all said "Yes" to God. Simple, direct: as long as you're comfortable conversing with angels. Many of us are not. Or we don't recognize the angels when they speak to us. No matter that the angels reassure us, as they did Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, "Don't be afraid." We are inclined to shush angels, to decline gifts, to say "No."

Some fears are real, of course. We know their names. Isolation, loneliness, unemployment, homophobia, xenophobia, terrorism and all the other “isms” – racism, sexism, classism. God responds with love and invites us to do the same. As Holy Writ reminds us “Perfect love casts out fear.” (I John 4:18)

Some fears are real. Some are not. I recall a story in “Time” magazine decades ago about a Christmas package sent to a Michael Achorn in Troy, Michigan. Michael’s wife Margaret picked it up from the post office, but on returning home she began to worry. Although it said it came from the Montgomery Ward store, the sender, Edward Achorn, was unknown to them, even though they had the same last name. What if it was a bomb? Postal authorities came. Package “opened remotely,” as they say in the bomb business. All that was left was the warranty for the now-exploded stereo AMFM receiver and tape deck console (yes, I said it was decades ago!). And they never did find out who Edward Achorn was.

“Fear not,” says the angel to the shepherds. Don’t be afraid. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” This is how God is with us. Revealed in ways that quiet fear and express vulnerability and love. This is how God is with us. God reveals salvation is some Middle East or Milford backwater where we least expect it, surprising us with packages wrapped in forgiveness and reconciliation and love.

If some winged angelic messenger from God should appear to us this season, whether it be the angel Gabriel or an angel like most of the ones we know—cotton costumes with tinsel haloes and cardboard wings—I think the word would be the same: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...for unto YOU is born...a Savior, Christ the Lord.”

Unto you. And you. And you. And me. With that divine reality no other reality is ever the same again. Not even the ugly ones.

You received a box tonight. If you take nothing else with you, please take this box and the story that goes with it. Dr. James Dobson tells about a man named Ron who was a child abuse victim. Ron grew up to be a child abuser. That's often how it happens. Both of Ron's parents were active alcoholics.

When Ron was seven, his mother came home from a party so drunk that she fell unconscious until Ron found her the next morning lying in the snow. She contracted pneumonia and died, and Ron ran crying to his drunken father for comfort. His father beat him with fists and screamed "Shut up! Boys don't cry like babies!" Ron's nose and two ribs were broken.

Ron's father beat him and his siblings regularly. Ron shot his first person when he was 12. He went to jail. Five years later he met Jesus Christ through a Billy Graham film. He was eventually released from jail, married, and had a little girl.

One Christmas, money was really tight. Ron scrounged up a few dollars and gave his wife \$20 to go to the store and buy food. She spent one of those dollars for wrapping paper and tape. They argued, then fought, about it. While they did, their three-year old daughter got into the wrapping paper and wasted it making a crude gift. When Ron saw this, he reverted to the behavior he had seen as a child, and beat his toddler violently. He cannot talk about it to this day without crying.

On Christmas morning when gifts were exchanged, the little girl ran behind the tree and retrieved her crude present, handed it to Ron and said, "Daddy, this is for you!" He was ashamed that he had hit her so cruelly for something she thought was a present. He slowly opened the box: and discovered it was totally empty.

His temper flared once more and he said “What have you done? There’s nothing in this box. Why did you give me an empty box? When you give someone a present you’re supposed to put a gift inside it!”

The tiny girl looked up at her father and said, “Oh, no, Daddy. The box is NOT empty! It is full of love and kisses for you. I blew kisses in there for my daddy and I put love in there too. And it is for you.”

Ron was crushed. He hugged his little girl and begged her to forgive him. Then he fell to his knees and pleaded for God to cleanse him of his terrible temper. And slowly, day by day, God answered his prayer. Ron kept the box by his bed for years, and whenever he was hurt or discouraged and the temper began to rise, he would reach in and pull out an imaginary kiss, place it on his cheek, and say, “Thank you, Lord, for my angel.”

*“And there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill to all.’”* God says “Yes!” to us and to our salvation. For those who say “Yes!” to God, nothing will ever be the same again. It may not be easy but it is most certainly divine. Say “Yes!” this Christmas.