

I want us all to take a little trip this morning. I want you to let your mind drift back to when you were a freshman in high school. Just take a few moments and think about...who you were, where you lived, what you were involved in, what was going on in your life. If you took me back to my freshman year, around this time I would have just finished up my first ever season of marching band and my freshman season of basketball, while already gearing up for volleyball season. It would have just been my mom and I in the house, she was working two jobs and we spent a lot of nights making quick runs to Wendy's for dinner trying to balance a schedule of work, practices, and games. I loved the Indianapolis Colts, mostly because I loved Peyton Manning and UNC basketball, mostly because I liked their colors. I would have still been in the thick of devouring Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, newly released into the world that summer, while blaring any combination of the Backstreet Boys, Eve 6, and Dave Matthews in my room. So that's me, what about all of you? What comes to mind when you think of your freshman year self? (*Take time for answers*)

It's not always a pretty sight going back in time. There are moments that just make us shake our heads like what was I *thinking*?! We realize so much of our tastes and opinions have changed and some have decidedly not changed all that much. There are most likely glimmers of ourselves now

that were present when we were 13/14 years old, and there are parts of us that we're probably like whoa I had no idea who I was back then. It's a weird age, a kind of liminal space between still feeling like a kid, but also being a teenager. You want to grow up and you want to stay put. The world is in front of you for the taking, but the world is also huge and has a lot of possibilities and how are you supposed to know what to choose? Let's face it, if the world depended on each of us when we were 13, the world might be in a bit of sorry shape...which makes the message of our gospel all the more incomprehensible and amazing this morning.

Let's travel our brains back even further in time, long before any of us were even thought of, let alone 13 years old. We descend upon Nazareth in the first century, and we find Mary, 13, maybe 14 years old, on the cusp of having her entire life turned upside down. Nazareth at this time is believed to have had a population of roughly 400ish people. So certainly small by our standards and fairly small even by Ancient Israel's standards. It was occupied by the Romans and too far from either the Sea of Galilee or the Mediterranean coast to be populated by seafaring folk. It was probably a town of artisans and farmers, people who worked with their hands and hearts for a living. We know nothing of Mary's family, though plenty of people have tried to write her story in fantastical ways throughout history. All we

know is that she is young, but of marrying age, engaged to a man named Joseph and she has a relative in another town named Elizabeth, so maybe her family has some ties to the priestly line, but we can't say anything definitively. In our world, she's a kid. In her world, she's a woman on the cusp of adulthood, preparing for the next step of her life, marriage. There is a plan for her life, even if we don't know what she thought about it.

We all know what God does with best laid plans though don't we? God has a tendency to come crashing through them like God is the Kool-Aid Man and our plans are a brick wall. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and her entire life is knocked off course. Gabriel tells her unimaginable things. She is going to have a child...an out of wedlock, not her fiancé Joseph's...child. Not only is she going to have a child, but it will be a boy, and not just any boy, but one named Jesus, who will be great, the Son of the Most High, and he will be given the throne of David. This miracle baby will be the Savior of the world, the promised Messiah who comes to fulfill the Davidic covenant. This isn't on any teenager's bingo card when they lay out their life plans, no matter what era of time you live in.

Now, I know how *my* teenage self would have reacted to this news and I'm sure all of you can imagine your own reactions, and I would bet that few if any of us had the reaction Mary does. Luke tells us she was perplexed

and pondering, and when Gabriel finishes talking, she just has one question, “How?” How can any of this happen because she’s not married yet, she’s a virgin, and all of this seems, well, impossible. Gabriel says it will be the work of the Holy Spirit and thus her son will be holy, the Son of God. He tells her of Elizabeth’s own miraculous pregnancy despite the thought that she was barren in her old age. Mary takes all of this in and then just says...ok, I’m in. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” No other questions, no freaking out, no yelling or crying or worrying (yet, I’m sure). She just says, ok, let’s do this, being the mother of the Messiah and having to explain this to Joseph and my family, sure, I can do that. The literal salvation of the world on her shoulders as a teenager and she just says, I can do this.

We hear this story and we think about ourselves at that age, and sure the world is different now than it was then, especially for teenagers whom we would still define as “kids” today, and we think, there is just no way that I could do that. And it’s true...the example that Mary gives us is one that feels pretty unattainable, to meet world-changing news with a calm and centered heart is pretty incredible, and yet...the job that Mary is given, the role she is asked to play...honestly...it’s a job, a role that we have too, we just don’t always think about it that way.

And sure, no one is asking any of us to literally carry the Savior of the world and give birth to him, however, we are asked, every single day to carry the message, the life of the Messiah with us, take it out into the world and bear it to others. We are the living, breathing vessel of God's miraculous, unconditional love in the world and for that mission, that calling, we would do well to look to Mary to learn how to respond.

We are *all about* finding reasons to not do the Jesus thing. We have a laundry list of people we can't stand, groups we can't tolerate, caveats we would like to have people sign on the dotted line to, exclusions we would like to make mandatory. We have a million other things to do, places to be, schedules to maintain. We don't want people to think we're weird or outspoken. We don't want to rock the boat, we don't want to give too much because then people will just ask for more. The list could go on and on and on of all the reasons why we're like, yes, yes, Jesus, we love you, but we cannot bear you into the world. The calendar is just a smidge too full. We don't want our life turned upside down, our hearts changed, our world made complicated and so we politely say, we love you, Jesus, but I gotta keep quiet on this one.

And then there's Mary...her literal life on the line, because if she gets caught having a baby out of wedlock from Joseph by another man, he could

take her to court and demand she is stoned to death. Her reputation, her family, her entire plan is on the line, and she doesn't have a list at the ready of excuses for why now is just a *really bad time* for a favor, God. She takes a deep breath and says, ok, here I am, let's see what happens.

As we are on the cusp of this Christmas season, as the anticipation and the waiting are almost over, my prayer for all of us is that we are filled with the determined, no holds barred, take on the world faith of Mary. That we take the gift we are about to receive in the baby Jesus and bear him out into the world, to share the love, light, hope, and grace that he was born to bring. May we not hoard the gift we have been given, but share it for the sake of the world, our neighbor, all of God's creation. Each of us, no matter what age we are, knows the power of hearing God loves you, so take that I love you and say, here I am, God, I'll go take that message to your world.

AMEN!!!