

Here Am I

Be with us in our waiting, illuminate your path for us, and help us hear your wisdom. Oh God, our great creator, Amen.

Today, we light the fourth candle, the candle of love. This represents God's love for us. Today is also one of the few days within our tradition that we take a little time to focus on Mary and the wisdom in her story for us.

I've mentioned in previous sermons that I am a cancer survivor. My cancer doesn't really go away. I've been blessed to have amazing doctors and access to outstanding medical care, so I have outlived many prognoses first given in my original diagnosis. I've learned to treat it more like a chronic illness instead of a life-threatening condition. Throughout the course of my journey with my illness, I have had the joy of being surrounded by some very strong women. Family, friends, mentors, teachers. All women who, during my cancer journey, have taught me how to be strong, vulnerable, at peace, fight, or accept that which I cannot change. I spoke about my grandmother, who taught me how to fish, and about the journey of waiting. That lesson would help me immensely during my cancer journey. Another important woman on my journey was Leslie

I met her through an online support group for cancer patients. She taught me about acceptance and active surrender. She had also been diagnosed with brain cancer, but hers seemed more aggressive than mine and wasn't responding to treatment as well. We both had a deep faith in God and were struggling with that faith, so we often talked about the bible and if we found it comforting or not.

During one of our chats, Leslie brought up Mary and how much strength she drew from her story, especially the beginning and her call to become Jesus' mother. She would say if Mary could have her moment of shock, possible doubt, maybe a little fear and still find the strength to do what God was calling her to do, maybe she could find the courage to keep going, too. I always found that inspiring.

In our text for today, we encounter the annunciation or the announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she will have a son to be named Jesus, who will be called the "Son of the Most High." As Gabriel establishes the ancestral lineage for Mary, I wonder what she was thinking. Was she in that place where she was trying to wake herself up from what must have felt like a very strange dream, or was she comforted by the light surrounding the angel who had come to

visit? Her response is something we can all relate to. “How can this be?”. I wonder how often we’ve said the same or similar things when we’ve received difficult news. Maybe the news that we know will change our lives forever. Knowing nothing will ever be the same or that if we agree to continue forward, the road ahead will be incredibly difficult. “How can this be?”

Gabriel then continues and shares what God has done for Elizabeth, proclaiming, “Nothing will be impossible with God”. It was after hearing this that Mary says, “Here am I.” In the Song of Mary, which we read as our Canticle today, we see a powerful prayer of strength, justice, and love for God. A prophetic witness for the world that was, is, and is yet to come.

In a blog post, Rachel Held Evans, a popular Christian author, said: “This is the stunning claim of the incarnation: God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside. And in her defiant prayer, Mary—a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land—names this reality.

“God is with *us*. And if God is with us, who can stand against us?” Through naming and claiming space for those often left on the margins, this text allows us the space to pause alongside Mary. To hear the words of the Song of Mary in our own lives as we consider our own “Here am I” moments. The ones where we recognize God with us.

I think this is what Leslie connected to so deeply. She could feel God with her when she connected to Mary’s story. She could find peace knowing she didn’t have to be perfect in her love for God or attendance at church during her illness or other parts of her life. God’s love would transcend all of that. She knew she could rest easy, knowing nothing would be impossible with God.

Advent has been a season of watching, of waiting. I wonder what we saw, what we heard. What was God calling our attention to these past few weeks?

Sometimes, we get caught in the “How can this be” moment for longer than we would like. We can forget that “nothing is impossible with God” and miss those sent to tell us the good news, news that helps us move to the moment of “Here am I”.

This discernment process doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Luckily, we have an entire community of people who also walk alongside us on our journey. Just like the strong women in my life, we all have groups of people who keep us grounded and help us move through difficult moments. Leslie helped to teach me what surrendering to God’s love could look like.

I can only imagine what was going through Mary's mind as she contemplated the announcement from the angel that day and thought about the perils to come as she proclaimed, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

As we see Advent end and our period of watching and waiting end for now, I pray we take what we have learned during this season and hold it close throughout the upcoming year.

I pray we feel the deep love of God Mary felt in her Here Am I moment, knowing it wasn't without pause.

And take comfort in the deep love of the God who walks alongside us on our journey this season and always.

Amen

Sermon Reference:

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/unsentimental-advent?fbclid=IwAR1VetiRfV4SmCXVRHrOVvck8DBoQMsmYFxAxBXeJQmsnBn0xZNBGWNmpKgY>