

In a devotional book I use, I came across this little snippet by Abbe Jane Wells. It comes from a book titled *The Gospel of Abbe Jane Wells*.

"Just about everybody tends to forget that it took a 'yes' from Mary before God could send forth his son - and if there is any truth to the saying, 'when the time had fully come,' it is that *Mary's* time had come when she went into labor at the end of her pregnancy; *that's* when the time had fully come - *that* is when Jesus' time to be born had fully come!

"As for the thought 'had Jesus come to a different people in a different place at a different time . . . 'I don't think you can juggle his place in history - or Mary's—that way; and since Jesus was born of Mary, you'd have to get her as well as Jesus into a 'different people in a different place at a different time' which isn't possible.

"Of course, it is possible for God to have a Son of a woman 'in a different people in a different place at a different time' - but *that* son wouldn't be Jesus, for Jesus was Mary's son as well as God's which lotts people tend to forget at times.

"For all I know - for all anybody knows - God may have 'proposed' (or propositioned?) through the ages but, *as far as we know*, Mary was the first one to say an unqualified 'yes'.

"When the time had fully come,' . . . and the 'time had fully come' only because the woman Mary said 'yes.'"

Abbe Jane Wells is convinced that Mary had a choice. And that Mary, could have said "No" to God. But Mary said "Yes". And that makes all the difference. What do you think? Do you agree?

I do. And I believe it makes a difference still today. In fact, as I reflect upon this scripture it is clear to me that it indicates that God wants to work through us. Not only does God want to work through Mary, God wants to work through you and me.

We sometimes find that hard to believe. Maybe that is why we have this scripture for today. Because in this scripture we can discover a model that helps give us hope.

First of all, we can discover hope, as we understand that God cares about us and God loves us. Our relationship to God is one in which

God comes and reminds us over and over that we are cared for. We are loved. We are valued.

The Angel comes to Mary and greets her by saying, "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty. Beautiful inside and out! God be with you."

In that small greeting, Mary is reminded. We are reminded that God cares about us for who we are. We are loved and valued and it doesn't matter whether we are tall or short, big or small, wealthy or poor, old or young. We are valued. God comes to remind us of that.

Knowing that we are loved helps. But it is not the only obstacle we need to face in order to find hope and let God work through us. We have to face our fears. **If we are going to discover hope, we need to face our fears.**

Mary did. When the Angel came and greeted her. She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind such a greeting like that.

But the Angel said, "ah, Mary. You have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give to a son. He will become great. He will be known as the son of the Most High God. He will sit on the throne of David and of his kingdom will last forever."

Mary's first response if one of disbelief and fear, "Wait a minute? How can this be?"

You see, Mary had a lot to lose in this proposition. She was engaged to a young man, Joseph, who was a carpenter. He would most likely have provided well for her and her family.

She had a bright future, a hopeful future. To accept this risk meant that she might lose Joseph as a husband. To accept this risk, could even put her life in jeopardy. She had a lot to lose.

But following God is a risk. We have a lot to lose. Mostly what we have to lose is our sense of control and power for the future. Following God, saying yes to God means that we have to face our fears of not always being well liked. It means we have to face our fears of giving up control. It means we have to face our fears of self-security, so we can reach out to build bridges to others, instead of building walls that isolate us from others.

If you are going to follow God, be willing to face your fears.

But this story also teaches us something else about following God and discovering hope. It teaches us that we can give our limitations to God. When God called Mary, she responded out of fear. She also reminded God of her limitation. A big one as far as she noticed, "Wait a minute. God's wants me to have a child? How can this be, since I have never even been with a man? I am not even married?"

The response? "Don't worry Mary. The God who created the whole universe will create a new child within you."

If we are going to find the hope that God wants for us, we need to understand that we can give our limitations to God. We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to have all the answers about faith and life. We just have to be willing to give ourselves to God. Are you willing to give your limitations to God and let God work through you?

When we let God work through us, incredible things happen. A baby is born to change the course of history. Lives are touched. Hope is given. Faith is restored.

Right after the fall of the Soviet Union, two Americans answered the invitation by the Russian Government to teach morals and ethics in a variety of places, including a large orphanage. There were about 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of this orphanage.

These two related the following story: It was nearing the holiday season, time for the orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and the orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid the strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from the tan felt we had brought from the US. The orphans were busy assembling their mangers as I walked among them to see if they needed any help.

All went well, until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6-years-old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly I called for the translator to ask the lady why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending of the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mama and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift.

So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." So I got in the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him - for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed.

Little Misha discovered, in his relationship with Jesus, someone who would never abandon him or abuse him. Someone who would stay with him always. And Misha discovered this hope, all because two people were willing to let God work through them even with their limitations.

What about you? What is God calling you to do? What are the deep down, inner urges and nudgings in your life that you have been trying to ignore?

God is calling you. God is calling me. Just like God called Mary. Take time to say yes. Let God work through you. Experience God's love, give God your fears, give God your limitations and let go to see what God wants to do through you.

Amen.