

Against All Odds

As we begin today, I have a question for you: How's your faith?

By any stretch we've had a challenging year. 2020 has been anything but what we anticipated; 2020 has been anything but what we were planning; 2020 has been anything but what we were hoping. For many of us 2020 has been a year of shattered dreams, weddings that either couldn't take place or were very different to the dreams of couples getting married, the loss of loved ones who we couldn't celebrate and remember in the way we would have chosen, confusion, disappointment and anger over exam results, the loss of jobs or the frustration of not being able to go to work, the very different way we've had to conduct our relationships – not being able to meet and care for family and friends in the way we would like, the huge pressure of the constant changes, finances, careers, businesses and many places for the future put on hold or simply abandoned.

Perhaps, in six words, 2020 might be: Not quite what we were planning! Perhaps one of the biggest challenges of 2020 has been the uncertainty of everything. Those things in life we got so used to being able to rely on, simply taken from us. And, perhaps, one of the biggest challenges as we edge closer to 2021, is the continued uncertainty of what is to come.

We all long for those familiar things of life to be familiar once more. Being able to meet with friends and family; to go for a walk or a meal; to go to the cinema, the theatre, the sporting events. To be able to go freely in and out of our homes and the homes of our loved ones and friends. To visit our elderly relatives, or those in hospital, our neighbours. We long to be able to go to work, to be in the office with colleagues around us. Perhaps we long to have a job in 2021.

We long to be able to plan holidays and trips and visits; we long to gather again as a church community; we long to be physically present within this precious community on Sundays, in the church building and in the week in our homes. We long for our familiar groups to meet in familiar places and ways.

Right now, though, we don't know what 2021 will look like and my question to you is this: How's your faith? How are you doing, friends? No, really, how are you doing?

Perhaps the uncertainty of 2020 and the uncertainty surrounding 2021 has been, and continues to be, a challenge to your faith. My best guess is that most of us, most of the time, don't really like uncertainty. Mostly, most of the time, we like to be able to know, pretty much, how things will go. We, at least, like an element of control, to plan and prepare and live as we choose. And, maybe, secretly, we all would love to be in total control... of everything!

My best guess is that we prefer certainty to uncertainty. I have another question: What's the opposite of faith? The classic answer to that question is doubt. We all know that if you doubt, you don't have faith. I'm guessing that even now there are some of you who are starting to feel worried because you have genuine doubts... and I'm now going to tell you that because you have genuine doubts about faith, your faith, that really you simply lack faith!

Well, and I invite you to stay with me. Because, I wonder if, in truth, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty! Certainty, it seems to me, removes the possibility of faith. If you are truly certain about something you don't need any faith at all. Friends, I'm wondering if uncertainty, rather than being a threat to faith, is, in fact, a gift. That might sound a bit challenging – especially in the light of 2020 and the anticipation of 2021, but, I'm wondering if uncertainty, with all its challenges, might actually be the thing that gives faith the room to grow, and I'm wondering if we don't see that in a very familiar story.

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her (Luke 1v 26-38)

It seems to me, this is a story full of uncertainty and, may I boldly suggest, it begins with God himself.

What is God doing? If you were God and you wanted to make yourself known, how would you go about doing it? Wouldn’t you want to be certain that everyone would know you are God? Truth is, you are not God, and God chose a different way, a way filled with uncertainty.

Mary is greatly troubled at this appearance of the angel. Perhaps some of us know what its like to be greatly troubled or afraid after living through 2020. Perhaps, truth is, we are greatly troubled and afraid now. The angel tells Mary who this baby will be – the son of God. But Mary is thinking about something much more mundane: How? How... I am still a virgin. This pronouncement from the angel was loaded with uncertainty. Not only around the how, but what response will this news provoke. We are quite used to teenage pregnancy today, but for Mary, for Joseph, for the whole family, this was, make no mistake, a scandal.

For one thing, you can’t hide a pregnancy – not in the end! And in a close-knit Jewish community of the 1st Century this was a scandal. Even Mary’s future was uncertain. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant - as an adulteress – and subject to death by stoning. Mathew tells us Joseph agreed to a quiet divorce – in private rather than press charges against Mary. His future also, staggeringly uncertain!

How many times, I wonder, did Mary go over the angel’s words during her pregnancy. What questions, I wonder, went through her mind as she got nearer the birth? How many times, I wonder, did Joseph second guess his encounter with the angel? How did he explain it and endure the uncertainty of the shame he no doubt wrestled with?

The uncertainty of nine months of questions, explanations and the lingering scent of scandal. What is God doing? God, it seems has taken a huge risk, with immense courage, and trusted his one and only son to a young, teenage, Jewish couple. It's filled with uncertainty: What will they do? God, it seems wants to play by the rules of being human with all its uncertainty.

Mary's response to the message brought by an angel is utterly astounding! This young Jewish girl, who was anticipating being married but not being a parent, and certainly not in these circumstances... makes a response, honest to the core and full of faith. She says: "I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said."

What courage in the face of bewildering uncertainty? Her world has been turned upside down in a moment. Nothing will be the same for her again. Everything she thought, planned, anticipated or hoped for has been changed by a meeting and a response.

For Joseph too, this changed everything. He would bring up a boy, born to his wife, but not his son. He too, lived with the scandal, the name calling, the uncertainty of how this new life, his life, their life, would go. We are not told the words Joseph used to respond to his visit from an angel. We are simply told he woke and did what the angel commanded. A response full of extraordinary courage. Even after Jesus was born, the future was anything but certain. The family had to flee from Herod – and they went to Egypt. Jesus, with his family spend his infancy in hiding, with all the uncertainty that brings. God, it seems, far from making the entrance of a king, who wants everyone to be certain he has arrived, embraces the uncertainty of being human.

Maybe embracing uncertainty is what gives faith the opportunity to grow. Mary and Joseph were never the same again, after their visit from an angel. By saying 'Yes!' to God and embracing an uncertain future they began an extraordinary journey of faith. It was a journey filled with both joy and pain. The joy of being part of God's bigger and far better story, and yet the excruciating pain of how that story unfolded in the life of their eldest son. But, it seems, that is often true of the journey of faith and the work of God.

Mary and Joseph embrace both, and so it seems, have many, many others who have said 'Yes!' to God. Way back, Abraham said 'Yes!' to God, the God who invited him to go to a land 'I will show you.' An invitation and a journey full of uncertainty, but full of remarkable faith. Moses, invited to hold out his rod over the sea when the Egyptian army are closing in from the rear and the sea

blocked the way ahead. Joshua, invited to step into the fast flowing, flooded river to gain entrance to The Promised Land. Esther, invited to plead for a nation before a king who had pledged to destroy her people. Shepherds on a hill, invited to go and see for themselves the baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. Wise Men from the East, invited to follow a star to worship a king they did not know, in a place they could not find.

The journey of faith, it seems, always involves uncertainty, but that is the very place where faith has the opportunity to grow. God, it appears, chose to come and dwell with us in all the uncertainty that is part of being human. He still does. His name is Emmanuel: God with us. God took a huge risk and embraced the uncertainty of being human. He came to us, to be one of us, to do life with us. And He still does. God still comes to us in the uncertainty that often confronts us.

2020 has been full of uncertainty, 2021 might be full of uncertainty. Perhaps what this very familiar story of the birth of Jesus reminds us, and teaches us, is that uncertainty might just be the place God is able to do his best work. For God comes to us, to be with us, and invites us to live our story in his bigger and far better story. Living in his story may involve times of great joy. Living in his story may bring us moments of great pain. But living in his story and embracing the invitation of the journey of faith, means we live in the light of his great and magnificent love. The love that loves us so much that the Christmas story took place at all.

Perhaps, friends, in all the uncertainty that continues to surround us, if we do what Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men and all those who have gone before us did.... If we say 'Yes!' to God, maybe right here and right now, he can do some of his best work in us.

So, what will your response to the invitation of the journey of faith be?
Against all odds, maybe you can say 'Yes!'

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