

I have carried this small wooden heart with me since last January. It was carved by a friend of mine who is a wood artist in the Norwegian tradition. She took her young daughter to the Minnesota Women's March last January – her daughter's first protest. They donned their pink hats on their way out the door, and filled their pockets with as many of these that could fit. Throughout the day, they passed out these tiny hearts at random to strangers they met along the way. Strangers in name, but not in hope and purpose.

I have carried this heart with me, so it is no surprise that Mary has been on my mind this Christmas season. Usually I am drawn to the vision of the manger – to the tiny, precious babe and the incarnated blessing that arrives with each new life born into this troubled, beautiful world. Each December, I come to this sacred eve to be reminded once more that each night a child is born is indeed a holy night and to dream of a world of peace and goodwill for all. But, in a year which began with the Women's March on Washington and ends with the uprising of the #Me Too movement, Mary's voice is needed. As we bear witness to the breaking of women's silence all around us, I long to hear her speak aloud what she ponders in her heart as the transformation of motherhood was heralded to her so long ago.

Even before the revelations of 2017, there has always been something unsettling about this part of the story for me. Gabriel appears to Mary in her home with a solemn and terrifying proclamation. I want Mary to wrestle with the angel a

little more, before she surrenders to her part in the grand plan for humanity's salvation. After all, the Bible is full of stories of men arguing with God for whole chapters and more! Did she really understand the meaning of what was being required of her? If she had dared to say no, what would the angel or God have done?

The ancient story offers no easy answers. But neither does the present day. For me, Mary's inspiration is not found as much in her storied virtue, as in her human response. How can this be? she asks. If 2017 has taught us anything it is that incarnation and the search for the Holy is hard, messy work. Resilience and resistance require more than just the ideals of fairness and equity, compassion and healing, peace and justice – they must be embodied in our imperfect humanity to become real. But in all our quests for a better and nobler world, it is not always clear when our “yes” is most needed or what it will demand.

Still the moment of discernment comes, whether we are ready or not. What was the most important “yes” you wrestled with this year? Perhaps you wrestled with putting your representative's phone number on speed dial and rediscovering your civic voice. Or how to create sanctuary and safety in our churches and homes. Or how to challenge yourself to look at the injustices of our society with an open heart. Perhaps you wrestled with saying yes to a new relationship and welcoming a child, a partner, a friend or new family. Or how to walk with another person as a

caregiver, a champion, or healer by their side. Perhaps you wrestled with something moving within you that called you to take on new growth or to embrace radical acceptance. You may not have felt you really had a choice, but you tried to meet it anyway.

Whatever your yes was, it is not just that that specific action or commitment that mattered. Your struggle, our struggle, to yes is an affirmation of faith that there is still a shining star in the sky to follow, despite the challenge of the journey. That there is still a world filled with wonder and promise, despite its dangers. That there is still a humanity and an earth worth forgiving and healing, despite their brokenness. That there is still a love worth answering wherever or however it might appear in the most unexpected places. No matter what the nature of the immediate threat around us might be, whether census or violence or greed, the Christmas story reminds us that acting on faith, hope, and love is a revolutionary choice and the seed of change in a world that has such need of it.

But we cannot come to a hard-won yes without the help of others. We often end Mary's story with her response to Gabriel. But as Luke continues the narrative, her next act is not to seek out Joseph or her town rabbi. Instead she runs to the home of her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with a son of prophecy. It is Elizabeth to whom Mary bares her heart and whose response she values, as she wrestles with her future and lives into the meaning of her yes. She stays with

Elizabeth for three months, before returning to Nazareth and Joseph and their unfolding future. In her poem, “Mary Speaks”, Madeleine L’Engle, imagines Mary reflecting on the journey of motherhood years later: “*O you who bear the pain of the whole earth, I bore you. O you whose tears give human tears their worth, I laughed with you. You, who, when your hem is touched, give power, I nourished you... O you who laughed and ate and walked the shore, I played with you.*” A prophet does not come into the world fully formed, he or she must be shaped by love and community.

I have carried this heart with me for the whole year. When my friend gave it to me, she said that she wanted to share something tangible to remember the love and hope of the day against all the fear and despair. I have carried it with me as a token of sisterhood, but also the larger truth that the Holy is incarnated in this world through our relationships. Tonight may it be a reminder that the power to choose love abides with us still.