

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2020 Yr B
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

The Anglican tradition has never known exactly how to incorporate Mary into our spiritual practices and faith. The Roman Catholic Church has long honored her as the Queen of Heaven who hears their prayers of adoration and petition for those on the margins. Orthodox believers venerate Mary as the Mother of God and her role as *Theotokos*, or God-bearer, is one that is not far from their minds or prayers. But Anglicans have kind of steered clear from Mary because of our early church leaders who were concerned that Christians were heaping false honors upon Mary and were taking away from the centrality of Jesus without any basis of doctrine or dogma. Of course, these concerns were raised by men, not women, throughout the ages, so one must take into account their efforts to keep Christianity free from undue womanly influence.

In recent history, Mary has been the source of new interest and new spirituality. The theologian and historian Yaroslav Pelikan, who wrote *Mary Through the Centuries*, highlights my love of Mary and what she means in my spiritual life. Pelikan says "One of the most profound and persistent roles of the Virgin Mary in history has been her function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, other faiths."

Not to burst your bubble, but Jesus wasn't Christian, he was a Jew who sought to remind his fellow Jews of God's eternal love beyond simply form and function. And just as Mary sets Jesus within the Judaic family tree of Jesse of Bethlehem, so she reminds Christians of our place within that Jewish tradition. More than that, Mary also connects us to Islam. In the Qur'an, Mary is deemed to be a most important woman; she is numbered among the faithful who constitute the great prophetic tradition of belief. In fact, the Qur'an explicitly teaches the Virgin birth, and includes this very story of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel. And if you really want to get a sense of the breadth of Mary's importance in the Abrahamic religions, then you should know that only one chapter in the Qur'an bears the name of a woman, and it is called Maryam, her Hebrew and Arabic name.

So what is it about Mary that makes us keep her at arms-length, a figure we love to claim at Christmas, but who gets short shrift the rest of the year? I suspect that in Mary we are faced with a model of courage, acceptance and faithful devotion that deep down we wish we had.

Remember the phrase God speaks in the creation story in Genesis? How does God call creation into being? "Let there be", he says and all manner of things came into being, light, animals,

fish, humankind. Similarly Mary's words usher in another creation story in her response of "Let it be." Mary similarly utters God's words of creation and creates a new reality that will usher in a new world, a Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. But to do that she must acquiesce and say "Yes, Let it be."

The only thing she can offer to God is herself, her very state of being. God did not test Mary. He did not make her endure some purification process. He didn't refine her in the fire of his greatness to prove to her who and what God was and is. Gabriel calls Mary "favored one", "highly favored" in more poetic words, because God sought her out. What we do know is that God only wanted to hear her say "Yes."

And this "Yes" is not one of indifference or apathy. It does not come from a place of low self-esteem or worth. Instead, it comes from a sense of humility, vulnerability, and grace. I would argue that in saying "Yes" Mary puts herself on equal footing with God in the creative process. She has responded to the great I AM with LET IT BE. She is not simply a vessel, but THE vessel that must be strong enough to contain the love and compassion of a mother who will see her son die on the cross. A vessel pliable enough that it will not crack at the slightest bump or resistance. A vessel large enough to contain the truth of God's creation and the goodness of humanity, and which, at the end, she will have to empty herself of in sacrifice to us.

But Mary is not far removed from us and we need to reclaim her from the seasonal focus that we confine her in. Within us lies the cooperative power of creation with God. And like Mary, God approaches us, beseeches us, supplicates, cajoles and entreats us to give birth to the Good News in our present-day Bethlehem. God chooses us and does so without any condition or reservation. We are all, each one of us, highly favored in God's eyes. And God only wants to hear us say "Yes."

Without the "Yes" we don't even get to the Good News. Without embodying Mary first, we cannot embody Jesus Christ. Here's the thing about embodiment – we don't like it. We construct our own identities, we believe we are self-made, moving through this life solely on our individual sense of agency, answerable only to ourselves. In believing that we are our own selves, that we are simply and majestically EGO as Freud would say, we ultimately deny the God who we wait for in hopeful expectation during this season of Advent. There's a disconnect there. And even Mary falls into this sense of EGO when she objects and says "But I'm just a virgin, a young woman. Who neither has means nor status." But with God, all things are possible.

It's not a fluke that God did not choose a queen or other woman of importance to be the God-bearer. In order to carry God within us, it takes humility, compassion, and the ability to say "Yes."

It's sometimes hard to say Yes to God and our litany of excuses not to is familiar to all. "I really don't have time to go to Church"; "My kids are really busy on Sundays"; "I give money to charities, so that should be enough outreach"; "I'm too tired at the end of the day to pray".

The truth is that every time we say yes to God we usher in, just a little bit more, the Kingdom of Heaven into our world. Every time we say yes, we have the creative power to combat societal ills like racism, hunger, poverty, isolation, income disparity, educational disparity, political factionalism, sexism, you name it. That is how powerful our “yes” in response to God can be, and Mary is the very example of that and we need to sit up and take notice. Because it is her “Yes” that allows Mary to say later in the Gospel of Luke:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.*

The Trappist monk and theologian, Thomas Merton says that saying “Yes” is “...*what it means to seek God perfectly; to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display; to keep my mind free from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of His will.*”

In other words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Amen.