



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2017

“Mary’s Yes”

(Luke 1:38)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Then Mary said, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

This past year I've had reason to be in Madison quite a bit, so I've been watching the major renovation and expansion of St. Paul's Catholic Church. It's right there in the center of campus, next to the UW Bookstore. They've done a beautiful job. Clearly, they are investing heavily in the next generations of students at UW. I believe our own district and synod can learn from them.

Anyway, above the stone entrance, in large, clear engraved letters is the invitation of Jesus: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." I thought to myself, "That's a perfect passage!" Thousands of university students will pass by it every single day, and will read the invitation every single day. And my hunch is most of them are weary, weary with homework and exams and papers, burdened with high personal and parental expectations, burdened with student debt, burdened with an uncertain future. What a great passage, a great invitation.

Above that engraved inscription, framed in stone, was the space for a very large mosaic which had not yet been installed. I pictured in my mind perhaps the classic gesture of Jesus standing with his arms outstretched in invitation, or perhaps Jesus holding a lamb in his arms. What was recently installed, however, is a picture of Jesus crowning Mary as the queen of heaven. It's a beautiful, colorful mosaic, but it kind of misses the point, doesn't it? Mary didn't say, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened." Jesus did. And Mary wasn't crucified for you; Jesus was. And we are not baptized into the name of Mary, but into Christ. And we don't eat and drink the body and blood of Mary, but of Jesus.

It's been said we Lutherans aren't sure what to do with Mary because we think she's a Catholic, and there's

probably truth to that. We do tend to steer clear of her, in response to Catholicism's emphasis of her. Mary was swept away in the post-Reformation, along with much of the accumulated tradition of the Saints. Mary had become the object of devotion, veneration, prayers, even shrines, pilgrimages, hymns, and all those relics- bits of her hair, patches of her clothing, vials of her milk, which were, for centuries, venerated in churches all over Europe, and seem to be making a sort of comeback today. Lutherans swept all that away and she almost disappeared from our tradition altogether. Meanwhile, her role continues to grow in Catholicism. She became the Queen of Heaven, a perpetual virgin, sinless, and therefore she didn't die but was assumed into heaven, where she intercedes for the saints on earth, does miracles for them, makes the occasional appearance and the like. The newest push is Mary as Co-Redemptrix, that somehow Mary's suffering contributes to our salvation. All this makes Lutherans squirm. And yet, Mary is an important part of the story. She is a real person, one from whom we can learn.

In our text, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary, she is startled and afraid. When angels visit people in the Bible, those people assume God is catching up with them for what they've done. And so the first thing angels must say is, "Fear not." In effect, Gabriel says, "You're not in trouble. In fact, you are highly favored." The point is not that Mary is being punished, (or rewarded), but that she is being chosen for a unique role. God has special plans for her, and has chosen her, this poor, young, non-descript, peasant girl to bear a son. He will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, and you will call his name Jesus.

But this creates a big problem. Mary is already betrothed, promised to a proud man named Joseph. He has already entered into a legal contract with her family, one of the conditions of which is her virginity. She's pregnant, but Joseph knows there's been no sexual activity; not with him, at least. So things get very complicated very fast. Moreover, this pregnancy upsets any other plans she may have had for

her life. Who would blame her then, for saying, “No?” Who would blame her for walking away from it all?

But she didn’t say “no” and she didn’t walk away. She said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Did you notice how out of synch that is with today’s mindset? We live in a culture that puts the highest premium on following your own path, doing your own thing, being your own person, being true to yourself, your hopes and dreams; not letting anyone or anything throw up a road block or send you on a detour. But here comes God, barging into Mary’s life with an unplanned pregnancy, and there’s hardly anything more life-changing than that. So Mary’s unconditional agreement to this announcement sounds strange to our ears.

Maybe we can learn from Mary’s “Yes,” from her willingness to be a servant of the Lord. For God still does that, you know. He still makes plans for ordinary, nondescript people, people not unlike Mary. God still comes into our lives with an agenda for us, an assignment, a calling, a person to serve, and then God sits back and waits for our response. He forces no one. Just know, however, that serving others is never convenient. There’s always something else we’d rather be doing. Therefore our immediate and automatic impulse is to say, “No thanks.” “I just have so much going on right now.”

Maybe it’s because we know there are lots of people in the world, and surely someone else can do that. But the trouble is, God isn’t calling someone else to do that. He’s calling on you, because you happen to be at the right place at the right time. So when God barges into your conscience with an opportunity to serve, what are you going to say? Luther wrote, “The inn [of Bethlehem] was full. No one would release a room to this pregnant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone . . .” He continues: “There are many of you in

this congregation who think to yourselves: ‘If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! . . . You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these!’ Then Luther asks, “Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.”

Shame on you wretched Bethlehem! Shame on you wretched Watertown! Christ is in our neighbors. God doesn’t need our service, but there are those in Watertown who certainly do.

We always have a choice. Mary gave an unqualified “Yes!” Whatever needed to be done, she was willing to do it.

What plan, what assignment, what calling of God waits for your response? He forces no one. And so the question is, what does he have in mind for you? Where has God come to you with an agenda, a task, an opportunity, a risk? What skill is in you that God would like to use? What love is in you that God wants you to share with someone else? What generosity is in you that God is patiently waiting for you to discover and give?

Mary said “Yes” to the Lord’s will. We see so many wood or plastic figurines of Mary that sometimes we forget she was a real person, a flesh and blood human, struggling with all the emotions you and I would if we were put in her place. And yet Mary consented without knowing much about what it would entail or where it would lead. She must have trusted that whatever it was God wanted her to do, he would also equip and support her in that role along the way. “I am the Lord’s servant. Let his will be done.”

When God breaks through into your consciousness and mine, one very real option is to turn heels and run. Most of the patriarchs and prophets wanted to run away, and at least one of them did, by the name of Jonah. When God’s

love breaks through into your consciousness, what will you do? How will you answer?

Mary's "Yes" to the Father's will prefigures her Son's own answer to the Father's will. At some point the Father asked his Son to save us, a calling that would lead to unspeakable suffering on your behalf and mine. But somewhere along the line Jesus said "Yes!" "Whatever needs to be done, I'll do it." Even there in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said "Yes!" "Not my will, but thine be done." Our salvation is found in that willingness, that answer of yes to die on the cross for us.

Paul wrote, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus . . . who for the joy set before him, (the joy of obeying the Father, the joy of serving others, the joy of doing what he was meant to do, the joy of doing those things which were prepared in advance for him to do) . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame," so that you and I could be saved.

"Yes" said Mary, scorning the deep shame in that culture of being unmarried and yet pregnant, and agreeing to a future she could not foresee.

What will you say when God breaks through into your consciousness? It will happen again soon, an opportunity to serve, and when it does, may you find deep within you the grace and trust and courage to echo the words of that young girl, startled by God, who said, "Yes, I am the servant of the Lord." Amen.

