

Mary's "Yes"  
Luke 1:26-55  
Advent 4B  
December 21, 2014  
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Only three more days before we gather in this room at dusk with candles glowing, children giggling and wiggling, and the favorite and best hymns of Christmas swirling around us. The anticipation of Christmas is lived out so fully in children. The simmering excitement. The constant peeking at gift tags on presents. The certainty that something big and magical and world-changing is going to happen overnight. Only three more days until this thing is born.

In my childhood Advent memories, I recall years when our neighbors on South Julia Street in Mobile, Alabama, participated in a moving nativity that spanned several houses. Only the houses across the street from us were invited to participate, and I felt crushed by this injustice. The center house belonged to the Weber family. The creche and star waited, empty, under flood light beneath the long arm of a live oak that we all climbed on and rode like a swing in the Summer months. But now, that corner of the yard was Bethlehem, and we all waited as the manger sat empty. There was great preparation as one of the neighbor dads cut out the large figures from plywood: shepherds and sheep, magi, Joseph, and Mary. I remember specifically a neighbor mom talking about her search for the perfect blue fabric to dress Mary.

December began, and the magi were way down the street in one yard. The shepherds were a bit closer at the next neighbor's house, and Mary and Joseph were closest as they all made their way to the creche. All of the participating neighbors were Catholic, and attending midnight Mass was a central observance in this pageant. After the Mass, a real baby doll would appear in the manger with a yard now full of onlookers to mark this birth.

Being the only Protestants on the street at that time, and *Baptists* at that, we never talked about Mary outside of these Christmas weeks. But something about the pageantry of that month-long nativity scene and the care with which that just-right-blue fabric was selected struck me as powerfully true.

At the end of a season of waiting, Mary's story guides us toward Christmas. We have felt the challenge of prophecy, darkness, slowly marking time. When we have talked about the world not-as-it-should-be waiting in darkness for a light to come that will transform us all, many of you have come to me and said, "I just want to *do* something. What can I *do* for our world, our nation, our city, our community?" Like a child who has been counting presents under the tree for one week too many, you are eager to stop talking and start giving your lives for God's good.

And so it is that I am so glad Mary meets us on this 4th Sunday of Advent, the darkest night of the year.

Mary deserves more than one sermon or study, and we can't possibly begin to explore all dimensions of why we should consider Mary beyond the month of December. For today, I think Mary models for us the way from active waiting to active living as we strive to be a God-honoring, truth-telling, kingdom-building kind of people.

Let me tell you why I need Mary today; her open eyes and willing heart. For me, this Advent, more than others, has been heavy as the prophetic words in each week's scripture have played on a loop in my mind while following headlines of unease and brokenness in our world. It has been that kind of year throughout 2014, and we've talked about grief and fear when the world is bubbling with violence and sadness. But add John the Baptist and the Prophet Isaiah to the mix, and the month of Advent has been inviting me to action.

Some people get a bit nervous when I start talking about social action. "Where is she taking us? Is it somewhere I can't follow? Will there be a place for me here if she goes too far?"

Some people wonder if God is whispering into my ear or, as we used to say, laying a word on my heart. Where is all of this talk of doing justice and loving kindness going to take us as a community? What are you up to, pastor? What is God up to?

And the true answer to each of those questions, the hopeful and the fearful, is that I don't fully know yet. Thirteen months into our relationship, we're still clinging to the belief that God has called us together, God is at work creating something new in this historic place, and that the 116-year-old legacy of being a congregation that challenges norms and practices a rich hospitality will serve us well in the decade to come.

But we're ready to know details. What's the plan? Where are we going? What's the magic formula to discovering our next chapter? In our individual lives and in the corporate life of this congregation, we want to know what comes after the dark night. We want to know what comes next, what's happening, where is God leading us?

I don't fully know yet. I just know I said yes and you said yes. Today, this fourth Sunday of Advent, we sit here and look at each other with our yes-es in our hands.

Mother Mary's story is sitting with us.

If you, like me, have read this story every December of your life, then you have likely quit noticing how wild and shocking the scene is.

God seeks out Mary. God seeks her out. Karoline Lewis notes, "She is favored. Regarded. The angel Gabriel comes to her. She doesn't seek this encounter out. God seeks her out."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3462>

She's young, she's alone, she is near marriage but not married yet, and an angel appears to her. An angel. A named angel, Gabriel. Gabriel the messenger of God is sent to Mary and greets her by calling her "Highly favored." She immediately wonders what is happening. Every hair on her body stands up. She feels a drop in the pit of her stomach.

Verse 29 reads:

She was thoroughly shaken (The Message)

she was troubled at his saying (KJV)

she was much perplexed by his words (NRSV)

The heavenly messenger's words baffled Mary (VOICE)

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. (TLB)

She doesn't seem shocked that an angel is talking to her. The presence of an unannounced, supernatural being is not the surprise. But she knows if he's standing there calling her favored, then something huge is happening. Huge means new. Huge means out of her control. Huge means something she can't predict or see the end of. Her mind is spinning. She's shaken, troubled, perplexed, baffled, confused, disturbed. Where is this all going? What is God up to? What's the end game?

Gabriel sees it on her face and speaks to her racing mind: Do not be afraid, Mary. You have nothing to fear.

Mary listens. She listens as he talks about CRAZY things. A baby miraculously breathed into her body. Not just any baby but a royal one. Son of the Most High. A baby highly favored like his mother. She listens. She asks questions. She listens some more. Gabriel reminds her, with echoes of Abraham and Sarah, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Making something out of nothing is when God shines!

She sits with this. She realizes she is being invited into a story that God is writing, a story that she only knows a tiny bit about, a story that will be possibly be written through her. She is told to not be afraid and to trust that the impossible is made possible by the One who has chosen her.

In choosing Mary, God honors her autonomy. God's messenger goes directly to her, a named and significant woman in scripture. She gets to choose how she will respond. She can walk away. She can tell Gabriel to leave. She can remain afraid and unwilling to take a first step without knowing what the next 99 will be.

But she says, "Yes."

She says, "Here I am, O God. Let it be."

"Like the prophets of old, she commits herself to the God who chooses the unexpected. At the same time, she entrusts herself to a new way, to a willingness to imagine a future beyond her present, to embrace an identity of which she has little knowledge or understanding but to which she willing to commit."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3462>

We don't mind the idea of saying "yes" to God. What we mind is not knowing the details of what that "yes" means. But Mary invites us to be open to God's work without knowing all of the hows and whens and whats. Mary is open to God's mysterious timing and ways. She trusts that if God has pursued her, then God will work out the details.

Father Richard Rohr describes this openness in his book *The Naked Now* through a poem, "The Virgin Prayer."

The Virgin Prayer (by Richard Rohr in *The Naked Now*)

You must seek to be a blank slate.  
You must desire to remain unwritten on.  
No choosing of this or that.  
Not 'I am good because.'  
Nor 'I am not good because.'  
Neither excitement nor boredom.

Remaining Nothing, An unchosen virgin,  
And unchoosing too, just empty.  
No story line by which to start the day.  
No identity enhancers or losses To make yourself valuable or not.

Nothing interesting, nothing uninteresting.  
Neither against, nor for something.  
Nothing to recall from yesterday.  
Nothing to look forward to today.

Just me, naked, exposed,  
No self to fix, change, or find,  
Nothing to judge right or wrong,  
Important or unimportant,  
Worthy or unworthy,  
I stand and wait, neither powerful nor powerless,

For You to name me,  
For You to look upon my face,  
For You to write my script,  
For you to give the kiss,  
In your time and in your way.  
You always do. And it is always so much better.

If we desire for God to move or invite us into a story, we must prepare ourselves as individuals. There's no magic bullet. This isn't about figuring out a formula or snagging God's favor before God's fickleness kicks in and the favor passes to someone else. Each of us has to do the work of welcoming God into our overly-full, overly-scripted, overly-

scheduled lives. We have to empty some parts of ourselves and let go of some needs to control and know all things. Then we stand alongside Mary saying, "Here am I."

Mary first says "yes" to the unknown thing God wants to do. She models this way for us. Mary goes immediately, with haste, without wasting a minute to her cousin Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with John the Baptizer. Mary goes there right away to share her "yes" and is met with a "me, too." **Saying "yes" to God's story is affirmed in community.**

This process I am describing can be hard to understand as a real life event when we use only religious words and language. So think of it like the process of preparing to buy a new car. You have been looking at a dozen types of cars and have narrowed it down to either a Toyota Prius or a Subaru Outback, then you start noticing those cars everywhere. Suddenly the roads seem filled with the thing you have on your mind.

I believe that any intention we set works in the same way. What we allow to become central in our consciousness is the thing we begin to notice, to give our energy to, and eventually form an identity around. That works both for good and for ill. We get to choose. Stuart Shelby, a friend and episcopal priest in Texas, shared with me this week: "Mary's yes to God was the focus and shape of her life; a life which gave life to all of us."

If we want to know what direction our lives should take, if we want to grow in our awareness of the Divine and the working of God's Spirit, then we set that before us as our "yes." When we become mindful of God and say that we want to be part of God's work, that "yes" will begin to shape us. As we talk about spiritual direction here, we will begin noticing the "me, toos" from each other. God will make a next step as our sense of community grows.

Conversations will sound like this:

"I have been thinking a lot lately about..." we'll say. "Funny you should say that," our friend will reply. "I was just reading..."

"I keep getting the sense that I'd like to start..." we'll share. "I have been thinking about something so similar," the friend will say.

Maybe we get goosebumps as we begin talking. Maybe it's that drop in the stomach. When we are discerning *right-ness* and next steps, in our personal lives and in our life as a congregation, there will be affirmations around us, and we will be looking for them because we have said "yes." Now we watch and listen for the "me, toos."

**Then after the "yes" and the "me, too", Elizabeth and Mary claims their part in the story through prayer.**

Let's put this in very practical terms once again. For months now, really over a year, I have been complaining that I have not been taking good care of myself. I am not exercising with any regularity. Sometimes I eat healthy food and keep a very clean diet, but other

times I'm eating whatever passes in front of me without any thought. So I say that I want to return to healthy ways I once knew. But practically, I have not made the necessary first steps, then I am frustrated by the results. We know this pattern. If it's not diet and exercise, it's another discipline or practice you have a fleeting thought about but do not live toward. In other words, whatever that *thing* is, we haven't really said "yes" to it.

For the story of our faith community, the challenge to us is opening ourselves up to God's work at a personal level, sharing stories with each other of how we sense God to be moving here, and then joining our voices earnestly in prayer as we claim the story we are living into.

And so we pray:

O God, we are blessed in this place.

The talent, the intellect, the desire to be people who reflect your goodness; you have blessed these people and equipped them to do amazing work.

We are blessed in this space.

The building, the location, the promise of community partners, the sound of the streetcar, the light that enters this sanctuary; you have blessed us with a place that matters.

Gather those pieces, O God.

The creative, brilliant individuals. The amazing place we are seated right now, we praise you for the ways you are pulling all things together that we will honor your ways in this corner of New Orleans.

We will be a light shining in the darkness.

We will tell the truth about our lives.

We will challenge what is broken in our world.

We will welcome discussion and disagreement and bless each other here.

We will be used by You, O God our Source and Sustainer.

We say "yes" to you today.

Grow our awareness of your presence. Open our ears and eyes to notice patterns and stories that are signs of your work. As we grow and notice, bind us together in community that our story might be swept up in Yours.

You remember us, O God. And your mercies are all around us.

We commit our lives to you.

Amen.