

Micah 5:2-5a
Canticle 9
Hebrews: 5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

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St. Martin in-the-Fields
Advent 4 Year C
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Mary and Me

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Mary's audacious "Yes," her bold and defiant courage are invisible in the iconic and often sentimental portraits we see of her. Mary is cloaked in a flowing robe, often blue, and holding her infant son with a serene smile. She is all of that too, but there is so much more that the church has minimized, ignored, or simply written out of the story. Her purity became important, not her power nor her prophetic voice.

Look again at the Henry Tanner painting of the annunciation that hangs behind the Welcome Desk in the Parish House. It's startling because Mary appears frightened, shocked, and perplexed at the divine interruption in her life.

What was Mary thinking when she risked it all for God? She had everything to lose when she said "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel. Women in her culture did not count and Mary could have been stoned to death for being pregnant by someone other than her fiancé. Her fear in the Tanner painting is palpable. But she said "Yes" anyway.

Mary might well have run to her cousin for safety, fearing for her life. Elizabeth, long barren, was miraculously six months pregnant with John the Baptist who "leaped" in his mother's womb when Mary appeared.

Perhaps Mary sought guidance from the older and wiser Elizabeth on how to tell Joseph about Gabriel's offer to her. Imagine what came after "There's something I need to tell you." Joseph emerges as a quietly courageous figure, too, for supporting Mary in her audacious "Yes." But that's a sermon for another time.

While we can find meaning and inspiration in a God who shows up in unexpected places it was no doubt shocking when it happened in real time to real people

Often lost in the telling of the Christmas and Easter stories is that God bet it all on two women: Mary of the womb who gave birth to Jesus, and Mary of the tomb who first proclaimed the resurrection of another Mary's son because Jesus' disciples had run away in fear.

It was a gamble for God who bet his kingdom on two of the least of these—marginalized and powerless women—giving them the power of the incarnation of Jesus and, in the proclamation

of the resurrection—the incarnation of our Christian faith.

Neither you nor I would be here in this church on this day had it not been for their courage.

Mary's words in "The Magnificat" are wild and insightful -- a comet across the sky of expectation, then and now but our familiarity with them has blunted their power.

Scholars point out that nowhere in the New Testament does a woman recite a longer passage of scripture nor sing a longer song--than Mary, the mother of God.

What if Mary had said "No?" Her "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel changed the history of the world. And God sought her consent first. Reminds author Debie Thomas:

The story of Mary and Elizabeth's worship teaches us that God's preferred realm is the nitty-gritty realm of the forgotten, the fragile, and the unformed.¹

Mary's defiant words that God has "Put down the mighty from their seat and exulted the poor, humbled and meek and sent the rich away empty" led Mary to another distinction: no other woman in the New Testament had her words banned two thousand years later by at least three modern dictators in Argentina, Guatemala, and India during British colonial rule.

What could possibly be so threatening?

In an Advent sermon preached 90 years ago, Dietrick Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed by the Nazis for plotting against Hitler said²

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at one the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary, Advent hymns ever sung.

This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.

Where in your life have you said "Yes" to God? Is there an invitation to say "Yes" that is still waiting for your RSVP? I ask that because in hearing stories of calls over the years people have often said "Oh, I've known since I was a child but ignored it."

Hearing those stories in seminary helped convince me I'd never be ordained because they were often huge moments of revelation as in, "I had a dream when I was four and the Holy Spirit told me I'd be leading people to Jesus." I knew that wasn't me because there were no burning bush moments in my life, nor stunning acts of grandiosity that pointed the way.

¹ Thomas, Debie, "At the Threshold" , December 12th, 2021

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, "God is in the Manger," a sermon preached on December 17th, 1933

The Reverend Frank Griswold, rector of St. Martin's for 11 years, and friend to many of you before he became the 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church spoke about his own annunciation in a sermon at Harvard in 2005:

Annunciations, often in strange and unexpected forms, can come upon us when we least expect them. One of the reasons I am standing before you today is because of a roommate in my ninth-grade year collapsing on his bed with laughter as he reported that the school chaplain had remarked that I should be ordained.

I laughed too at such a bizarre idea. Nonetheless it did take hold. Thus, my 9th grade roommate remains for me to this day a Gabriel and an Elizabeth rolled into one.³

Griswold continued:

Mary stands as an encouragement to us all. Following her example we need not be afraid when our tidy plans are overruled by sudden and often unwelcome outbreaks of what appears to be divine unreasonableness. "How can this be?" and the confusion that followed were where Mary had to begin to sort and sift her way haltingly toward "yes." Why should it be any different for us?⁴

It surely wasn't for me. I realize now that I responded to the whisper of God, with one "Yes" after another for 9 years.

As part of paperwork necessary for my ordination I needed to provide the date of my baptism and called the Methodist Church where I was baptized. A kind woman named Karen found the answer in a box in the church basement and called back two months later. "Laura, you were baptized on Easter Sunday, March 25th. As Sr. Leslie, my spiritual director pointed out, "March 25th? That's the Feast of the Annunciation when Gabriel appeared to Mary.

So listen. Listen. And listen some more. See what is calling to you and might be waiting to be born in the manger of your heart.

Let your "Yes" lead you on.

AMEN

³ Griswold, Frank, sermon delivered at The Memorial Church, Harvard University, December 18, 2005