

Advent 4: Saying Yes to God

Ruth Haley Barton

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb... And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’”

Luke 1:39-55

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.”

Meister Eckhart

In Protestant circles, we are very careful not to do anything that could be construed as Mary worship. We are so careful, in fact, that often we do not give her the respect she deserves. However, this week’s Gospel reading is entirely focused on Mary and her unique place in human history as the woman who birthed the divine Christ, God-made-flesh. Her story offers us a window into one person’s experience of receiving the will of God into her heart, her body, and her life. We do well not to dismiss her.

Mary was more than just an available womb. She was a particular kind of person for whom all of human history had been waiting...a person who was willing to receive Christ into the very depths of her being, allowing his presence to incubate there in the darkness until the fullness of time when God’s will would be completely revealed.

There was a spiritual essence contained in the person of Mary that made her the right one to participate so fully in God’s plan for the redemption of humankind. Part of that essence was her capacity to be totally given over to the will of God. She said yes to God with “a courage that opened her utterly.”

Whoever Does the Will of God is my Mother

Mary, it turns out, is a powerful example of what it means to be a true disciple—one who desires nothing more than to know and do the will of the Master. She is one who receives the Word of the Lord as a seed that is planted in darkness, allowing that seed to take root and grow until it becomes fully mature and pushes its way into the world. What, then, is involved in birthing the divine will? What sort of person is able to open to God so utterly that they incarnate Christ in the world?

First of all, it seems that there is in such a person **an ability to receive the word of the Lord and ponder it deep in one's heart.** Three times in the early chapters of Luke it says that Mary “pondered/treasured these things in her heart”—once in response to the angel’s pronouncement, once when the shepherds came and worshipped the baby Jesus, and once when Jesus got lost in the temple and was found teaching the teachers. In all of these situations, Mary demonstrated a capacity to hold large and potentially frightening or confusing realities in her heart without “getting freaked out.” She had a large interior space for prayer and contemplation that enabled the appropriate response to her unusual situation. Her soul was a deep well indeed.

There is a **capacity for curiosity and wonder.** Mary exhibited a delightful innocence that gave her the ability to ask the obvious question that others might not be willing to ask due to their sophistication. Like the young boy who didn’t know any better but to exclaim that the emperor had no clothes, Mary wondered what any of us would wonder in her situation and she asked her question right out loud. *How can this be, since I am a virgin?* What followed was the most hopeful and inspiring message one could hope to hear! No wonder the Scriptures say that anyone who wants to enter the kingdom of God must become like a child.

A person who says yes to God is **indifferent to anything but the will of God.** In the realm of spiritual journeying, indifference speaks of a state of wide-openness to God in which I am free from undue attachment to any particular outcome, capable of relinquishing whatever

might keep me from saying an unequivocal “yes” to God. Indifference means I have gotten to the place where I want God and his will more than anything—more than ego-gratification, more than looking good in the eyes of others, more than personal ownership or comfort or advantage. I want “God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.”

This is no small thing given how attached we are to our own plans for preserving and enhancing our own well-being. Mary is a compelling example of this important dynamic of the spiritual life because, despite the possibility of being ostracized by her community, judged harshly by those who did not understand the will of God in her life, rejected by her husband to be, enduring inconvenience and much pain, her response to the angel’s mind-boggling announcement was “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*”

Those who say yes to God have the **capacity to believe** that the things that God has spoken deep into our souls will be fulfilled. It was this particular aspect of Mary’s character that Elizabeth celebrated when Mary arrived on her doorstep. *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

We are not accustomed to believing the things that angels tell us in the middle of the night. We are much more accustomed to believing what we hear on the news, what our own pragmatic thoughts and rationalizations tell us, and whatever wisdom we read in the latest bestseller. But Mary *believed* what was spoken to her by the Lord to the extent that it became more real to her than anything else.

Those who say yes to God **seek the support of others** in responding faithfully to what God has revealed. Mary knew that she needed help to make sense of it all. Perhaps she even knew that she would need help to keep believing once the initial euphoria of the angel’s visit wore off. She had enough sense to know that she couldn’t share this with just anyone and so she sought out Elizabeth—someone who had had her own experience with angels. And Elizabeth’s greeting was all she needed to confirm the validity of her experience. This confirmation did not

come through tortured conversation and arduous discussion. Mary's presence triggered in Elizabeth a gut-level, Holy Spirit reaction that provided deep assurance to Mary as she embarked on this perilous journey of calling and commitment to becoming the mother of the Son of God.

Those who say yes to God must learn to **live between the polarities of strength and vulnerability**. In the person of Mary we witness a profound paradox. We learn that saying yes to God's will so completely, being willing to be the vehicle through which something so new and so needed is birthed, takes a certain kind of inner stamina. It takes strength to believe and courage to act on that belief.

Embracing God's will so completely also took Mary to a place of tremendous vulnerability and weakness—as it does for all of us. From the moment she said yes, she was cast upon the mercy of God and others. She was at the mercy of those who would make judgments about the validity of her claims, deciding whether to stand with her or reject her. She was at the mercy of Joseph's response to her unusual spiritual experience. And eventually, when she was at her most vulnerable—heavy with child and ready to deliver—she was utterly dependent upon Joseph's care and protection and the begrudging hospitality of an over-extended inn-keeper. She had no control over any of it.

And then she was called upon to receive the mystery and the miracle of the incarnation *as it was given*, which was probably very different than how she had envisioned it. The only thing she could control was her own faithfulness to God's call upon her life.

And that she did.

Like Mother, Like Son

Mary embodied a spirit that responds with the deepest kind of yes to the will of God when it becomes known. It was this spirit that she passed on to her son, Jesus. That is why it comes as no surprise that there is a profound parallelism between Mary's willing response to the

angel's pronouncement about the will of God in her life (*Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.*) and Jesus' response to God's will in the Garden of Gethsemane (*Yet, not my will but Thy will be done.*).

Jesus was who he was because he was his Father's child but also because he was his mother's child.

May we not take lightly the challenge that Mary's life presents to us—the challenge of saying yes to God in all the strange and compelling ways in which he calls. May God give us the grace to say yes when he asks us to be an incarnation of his Word in the world. May Jesus himself turn towards us and say, "*Here is my mother and my sister and my brother—this one who is doing the will of God.*"

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend on us, we pray. Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. Amen

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