

## **A Particular Yes**

Luke 1:26-38

December 21, 2008

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what kind of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible with God."

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

Then the angel departed from her.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God!**

There are a lot of important roles in the nativity scene – but almost none as important as Mary.

Michael Lindvall, a Presbyterian preacher, tells the story of a Christmas pageant at a former church where the director – and the person who determined who would play what role in the nativity – was a woman named Alvina Johnson.

Alvina had directed the “Children’s Christmas Pageant” through “ten pastors, nine US Presidents, three wars, and” Lindvall says, “who knows how many Christian Education Committees.” Alvina’s pageants always had exactly nine characters: one Mary, one Joseph, three Wise Men, two Shepherds, one Angel, and one Narrator. Exactly nine characters – nothing more, nothing less. For forty-six years, Alvina had scripted, selected, and directed precisely how the pageant would go – and her goal was perfection. Forty. Six. Years. But then things changed.

In Lindvall’s words, “Early in the fall something happened that deflected the inertia of nearly half a century of always doing it the way it had always had been done. The Christian Education Committee included the three young mothers of last year’s rejected Mary, Joseph, and Wise Man Number Two. And these young mothers pulled off what they call in Central America a *coup d’etat*. At their September meeting they passed the following motion: ‘Resolved: All children who wish to be in the Christmas Pageant may do so. Parts will be found.’”<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, Alvina was upset. “‘Young mothers,’ she said, shaking her head as though young mother were an illicit occupation. ‘Young mothers who have no knowledge of or experience in the proper direction of a Christmas Pageant.’”<sup>2</sup> And with that, Alvina quit as director.

Well, the pageant went off – with hordes of children and only a few hitches – and in the end, Alvina came around. The good news of God entering into the world even though Alvina was not in charge of casting a single character – not even Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> Lindvall, Michael, *The Good News From North Haven* (Doubleday, New York, 1991) p. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

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When Luke introduces us to Mary – all we get is her name. Luke is careful to explain where the angel Gabriel is going – to a Galilean town called Nazareth. Luke is careful to explain who Joseph was – a man who was from the house of King David. But all Luke tells us about Mary is her name – “The virgin’s name was Mary.”

Mary had not been through central casting. She was not groomed for the part that she would play in this event that would forever change the world. Mary was simply a young, knock-kneed, fiancée of Joseph who found herself entertaining the angel Gabriel – a messenger from God who had some interesting news.

Much has been made over the way Gabriel addresses Mary. What we have in our translation is, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” We usually pay attention to the first part of that address. “Favored” seems to suggest that Mary was, somehow, extraordinary – more holy than most – set apart from the rest of us. In reality, what is translated as “favored” is from the root word for grace. Mary is not so much holy as she is graced to receive this announcement from the angel Gabriel.

What should capture our attention in Gabriel’s opening address to Mary is the second part of the greeting: “The Lord is with you.” This is what is remarkable: that God calls a particular person, and no person in particular, to bear Jesus the Christ into the world.

Protestants have a problem with Mary because we shun the idea that she is a saint in a deified kind of way. But we cannot ignore the fact that Mary is special; and – indeed – a model for humanity. Not because she is more worthy of praise than any of the rest of us – but because when she was called by God for a particular purpose, she said yes. Yes – “Let it be with me, according to your word.”

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When the angel Gabriel got around to the particulars of his announcement, his opening line was “Do not be afraid.”

Don't you just love that? An angel, out of the blue, with this kind of message, telling a young woman "do not be afraid."

We don't know if Mary heeded the angel's advice, but we do know that she had some questions. Upon seeing the angel, Mary was "perplexed" and she "pondered" what had been said. Finally, after Gabriel finished explaining what was happening in her womb, Mary asked the question that we can surely anticipate, "how can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel Gabriel is no stranger to making announcements, and he also no stranger to getting questions about the details. Just six months earlier, as we heard Bryan read, Gabriel appeared before Zechariah to announce that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, would be having a child. For an opposite reason than Mary's, this was surprising news. After Gabriel finished explaining the details, Zechariah asked, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years."

Gabriel is more impressed with Mary's question – and we should be, too.

Where Zechariah asks "how will I know?" Mary asks, "how can this be?" Both are honest questions – yet Mary's acknowledges what is happening to her as a reality whereas Zechariah's expresses his denial until he gets the proof.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem called "After Annunciation." It captures the difference well:

*This is the irrational season  
When love blooms bright and wild.  
Had Mary been filled with reason  
There'd have been no room for the child.<sup>3</sup>*

It has been noted that most times the questions that God asks us are questions of *being*, rather than *knowing*.<sup>4</sup> God sent the angel Gabriel

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<sup>3</sup> From *The Weather of the Heart* (WaterBook Press, 2001) as found in the Rev. Heather Grace Shortlidge's Portable Snack paper on this text.

to ask – in a forward kind of way – if two families would be willing to answer the call placed upon their lives.

Zechariah said, “tell me more – give me the proof; there are some things I need to know.” Mary said, “yes – but how can this be?”

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God asks us questions of being, not of knowing. When God calls you, there is usually more to what has been asked than meets the eye; there is more going on than we can *know*. Gabriel’s visit to Mary would still be taking place if he would have explained all of the consequences of the news that he brought.

Beyond the obvious – “what will people think, including my fiancé?” – Gabriel’s message to Mary was fraught with responsibility, headache, and heartache. When God places a call upon your life, it is usually more than a brief interlude or inconvenience. More often than not it changes your life.

Abraham and Sarah – will you raise up for me a people?

Moses – will you lead my people out of the land of Egypt?

Jeremiah – will you, in your youth, prophesy to the powerful?

Mary – will you mother the savior of the world?

They said yes. And none of them *knew* what they were in for.

I know what you are thinking: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, Mary...who are we compared the great characters of the Bible? Don’t fall into the trap of putting the people that God called to do great things on a pedestal – at least for the wrong reasons. Those whom God calls are not more qualified, they are no more holy, they are no more special than you and me.

What makes them great is their willingness to say “yes” to God in the face of not knowing where that “yes” will lead.

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<sup>4</sup> Again, with thanks to the Rev. Heather Grace Shortlidge.

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We are edging ever closer to Christmas – the celebration of God’s inbreaking into our world in the person of Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. We are within sight of the nativity scene – where we find a cast of unlikely characters surrounding the manger. Characters who will offer their love and support to ensure that God’s gift to the world will grow into the man that will, indeed, redeem the entire creation.

As that nativity comes into view – do not forget that each one of those characters, including Mary – the mother of our Lord – is a particular person, and no person in particular. Just someone with certain set of gifts who said “yes” – someone who made peace with *being* the person through whom God worked God’s purposes out.

In our church we call that the “priesthood of all believers” – it means that each of us is called to do something, to be someone, in the grand plan of God’s salvation.

The “priesthood of all believers” means that there is room in the drama of God’s redemption of the world for more than those we remember in the Christmas nativity. Room for all of us who have the courage to say “yes” – in our particular way.

And so let it be with us, according to God’s word.

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Amen.