

MARY SAID YES

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Grace Church in New York
Luke 1:26-38
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For four years, while I was in college, I worked at the Bath & Body Works at the mall closest to where I grew up. I would be holiday help there while I was home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, two very busy times in retail. In case you're unfamiliar with Bath & Body Works, it sells body lotion, shower gel... that kind of thing. We're not talking about important things, when taken into the grand scheme of things, but, I came to learn, on December 24th, even body lotion can feel life or death.

Every year, without fail, as we drew closer to Christmas, the store would get busier and busier and shoppers would get more and more stressed. And then would come December 24th, and the store became a buzzing beehive of chaos and mayhem. We, the worker bees, were carrying items in from the back to put on the shelf as fast as we could, but could never seem to keep up with the demand, and the shelves were always half-full at best. Which would always mean that a shopper would stop us to ask us if we had what they needed in stock. Nine-times-out-of-ten we did not; we would have long run out of the cucumber-melon scented lotion that, I would learn, was the only thing their daughter, or wife, or mother had asked for. Some people would tell me the lengths that they had gone to in order to attain this lotion, which, because this was before internet shopping, meant lots of driving from mall to mall to go from store to store. I sometimes wondered if they were telling me this story in hopes that I would work whatever miracle was necessary to procure the cucumber-melon lotion, but looking back, I suspect that they really just needed to vent their frustration. Other people, however, were not kind about the situation and would yell at me. In addition to my Christmas Eve memories of the midnight service, dinner with the family, and opening presents early, emblazoned in my mind for all time to be associated with December 24th is the look on someone's face when they hear that there is no cucumber-melon lotion for them: the flaring nostrils, the bulging eyeballs, the high pitches to which their voice can reach.

I do not mean to make fun of these people. I've had my moments, too, of panic and worry, fear and even anger. When things don't go the way I planned, when I feel under pressure to meet others' expectations, when Christmas is coming and that starts to create anxiety instead of joy.

Which makes me appreciate all the more the story of Mary, and in particular, the things to which Mary said no.

She is, of course, most famous for when she said yes: to becoming the mother of Jesus. We read this morning about when the angel Gabriel came to tell her that she was God's favored, chosen one to be the mother of the Messiah. And Christians ever since have given thanks that she agreed. But we don't often stop to consider what she had to say 'no' to in order to say 'yes' to God.

She was young, and more importantly, unwed. She was a woman at a time when that meant she was little more than property to be taken care of. As an unwed young woman, she had little to no rights, and absolutely no way to care for herself, let alone a child. Societal expectations and gender roles were very clear and very strict, with no room to try and do things a different way. She had every reason to feel pressure, to feel fear, maybe even to feel anger that God would ask so very much of her, but to all of these things, Mary said no. To societal pressure to do things the way they *should* be done, Mary said no. To religious pressure to believe things in her life and in the world would happen just as the religious leaders said it would happen, Mary said no. To fear, and anxiety over tomorrow, Mary said no. To thinking that she wasn't special enough or anyone of any merit, Mary said no. To any doubt that she had in her own heart, Mary said no. To anything and everything that was counter to God's will for her, Mary said no.

As much as getting ready for Christmas can stress us out now, the very first preparing for the birth of Jesus came with much, much more stress. More pressure, more expectations, and probably more yelling with flared nostrils, bulging eyes, and high pitched voices. But to everything, every person, every voice that was not joining her in praise for what God was doing in her life and for the world, Mary said no. But with gratitude for the birth of Jesus, Mary said 'yes.'

This morning we also read/heard Mary's words of praise as she realized all that she was saying 'no' to in order that she might say 'yes' to God. We call her words "The Magnificat" and in them, Mary exclaims: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked on the lowliness of his servant... His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation... He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things."

To the idea that things will always be the way they've always been, Mary said no.
To the belief that God is distant and uninterested in human plight, Mary said no.
To the powerful who exploit their position at the expense of others, Mary said no.
But to the idea that God is doing something new, some revolutionary, Mary said yes.
To the belief that God was inviting her to be a part of God's redemption of the world, Mary said yes.
To the almighty and all-loving God whom Mary trusted above all else, Mary said yes.

This morning we complete the Season of Advent, a time the church puts aside to prepare for Jesus' coming into our world. We wait, with Mary, for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, God made man in Bethlehem. We prepare, with the prophets of old, for the time when Jesus will come again to make all things right and in accordance with God's kingdom. And, there is a third component of Advent, of waiting and preparing; this third component is remembering that Jesus comes into our world here and now. Jesus comes into our hearts, Jesus comes to us in the faces of our friends and family, Jesus is made known to us when we encounter the stranger. Advent is about being aware of the ways in which Jesus comes into our world, into our lives, right now.

But how do we know what God is up to? Unlike Mary, we are probably not going to be greeted by an angel and given an outline of what to expect next. So how do we know what God is bringing to life in our world? What helps us figure out where God is moving us forward in our lives?

Like Mary, we can consider where we are strengthened to say 'no.' Where do we feel pressure, either from the world or from within ourselves, that makes us stress or worry to the point of no longer containing any joy, and yet, find that we have the power to say 'no' so we can find joy again? Where do we have high expectations, such that anything less than perfect feels like failure and we begin to question our own goodness, and yet, the wisdom to say 'no' and remind ourselves how very loved we are? When do we run the risk of being overwhelmed with fear of the unknown or anxiety over what is to come, and yet, are washed over by the peace to say 'no' and hope begins to emerge? When does everything seem impossible or doubt seems to be winning our inner dialogue, and yet, deep from within ourselves we hear a resounding 'no' and faith becomes an option again? These are the moments, when, like Mary, the things which are counter to God's will for us are met with a loud 'no;' and we can turn towards God's joy, love, peace, and hope with a grateful 'yes.'

It's true, the church season of Advent only has a few hours left, but Mary's example lives on. We, too, are God's beloved ones. We, too, are part of what God is doing in the world. And we can, like Mary, be people who say 'yes' to God.

That God is still breaking into our world to bring light to the darkness can sometimes feel preposterous, even impossible. But to the idea that something would be impossible for God? Mary said 'no.'

That God would use us to bring about God's purposes can sometimes seem illogical, and maybe even unbelievable. But to the idea that a virgin could give birth to a child, and that child would be God-in-flesh, Mary said 'yes.'