

“Greetings, Favored Ones!”

Luke 1:26-38

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Much attention, and many wonderful sermons have focused on what has been called “Mary’s ‘Yes’ ” to God in this passage. Upon hearing that she will be overcome by the Holy Spirit, and find herself carrying the very Son of God, she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” For a very long time, Mary’s “Let it be” has been taken for a “yes,” as if she is agreeing to do God a favor. Some have said that she could have said “no,” either explicitly or by doing something destructive to the baby. Clearly she had a lot more to lose than just her teenaged freedom; her entire social circumstances will be turned upside down, and what teenager do you know that would take that so calmly? She would be mocked, and considered a sinner, to have become pregnant before becoming married. Who would want that? But Mary takes neither of the “no” options, and so it has been posed that she says “Yes,” knowing she risks everything, because she sees herself as God’s partner in the divine plan.

Now, I’m a firm believer that we Christians are called as partners in God’s service, but I am not quite so convinced that Mary had that concept in mind, either consciously, or unconsciously, in that “Let it be” moment. I have a feeling it was more like, “If I am going to go through what it will mean to be pregnant before marriage, this child had better be some hot stuff!” or maybe, “Whew, what a relief!

I really wasn't looking forward to the start of all that 'So, when are you going to make me a grandmother' talk by Joseph's mother." If Mary says "Yes" to anything, it is Gabriel's announcement that there is nothing impossible with God, but probably not so much to being a willing participant in the salvation of the world. As I hear Mary's words, and think about what she might have been thinking, what comes to mind is not affirmation, but resignation. When Mary says, "Let it be according to your word," I hear her saying, "If this has to happen, at least let it take place *as* you have told me." To my ears, it's a sort of, "Well, what else am I going to do? Say no to God?" kind of resignation rather than a "Bring it on!" kind of enthusiasm.

This is not to say that Mary would lose any of her luster as the mother of God. But it is to say that in our desire to make Mary into who we want her to be, a strong, courageous young woman in tune with the God who has reached into the depths of obscurity to tap her for the most important job in the world, that we may be forgetting how she really was at that moment of learning how drastically her life would change. Far more likely is that she was like any other teenaged woman in those days, facing an arranged marriage with an uncertain future, and wondering whether she was up to the task of being a wife and a mother. She likely dreaded the thought of leaving behind the familiarity of her parents' home, for the new and unknown surroundings of Joseph's family. There is a very real humility in Mary's

words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” but she would have had little other option but to be humble, considering her station in life.

No, what makes Mary extraordinary is not that she said yes to God, but that there really wasn't anything that extraordinary about her in the first place. I'm not talking about the fact that she wasn't royalty. Many people in those days thought the savior would come from a family with a fighting chance of providing a heroic figure. Mary didn't have that pedigree. I'm not talking about the fact that she wasn't from Jerusalem, the center of the known universe for the Jews, but rather from the backwaters of Galilee. I'm not even talking about the fact that she was a woman who, despite their prevalence in society, rarely had a key place in the story of God's people among all the kings and the warriors. No, when I say that Mary was completely un-extraordinary what I mean is that we have no indication that she was of any kind of great spiritual caliber, with any kind of connectedness to God that she should be considered worthy of bearing the Son of the Most High. Unlike her relative Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, who are carefully described by Luke as “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord,” Mary's spiritual qualifications go unmentioned, if there were any at all. We would expect extraordinary things from extraordinary people, as Elizabeth and Zechariah seemed to have been, but if Mary had any reason to be chosen by God on her own merits, Luke didn't see fit to mention it.

This is not, of course, to say that God didn't deem Mary extraordinary on some other merit system. Unlike the first angelic words given to many in the Bible, the first words Mary heard were not, "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid" is what Zechariah heard, and what the shepherds heard, but Mary hears something quite different. She hears, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you." Mary is, then, simply favored, for unspecified divine reasons - the ultimate expression of grace, a declaration so extraordinary to someone so un-extraordinary that she became all discombobulated and Gabriel has to give her the standard line after all: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

It may be, then, precisely Mary's lack of pretension, her lack of anything resembling self-importance, that made her the perfect, or at least chosen, vessel for the salvation of the world. At the risk of somehow sounding like it is Mary who resembles Frodo from "The Lord of the Rings," when it is, of course, Frodo who takes his cue from Mary, the two characters perhaps share that same common characteristic of being able to be overwhelmed by a greater power, to live in the presence of that power, without being fundamentally changed or corrupted by it. It is not quite fair to attribute a simple pureness of heart to either Mary or Frodo as the reason they were selected for their tasks, but their pureness of heart surely shone through as each lived with the ramifications of being chosen for a job they neither wanted nor sought. Once again, our Mary is so extraordinarily un-extraordinary that we may imagine it never even occurring to her to try to take

advantage of her condition, to somehow profit from it, when God knows she would have needed the extra money. Rather than being lion-hearted and strong enough to bear the burden of Christ, it may just be that she was too ignorant to know what she was getting into!

If it sounds like I am taking all the fun out of Mary right before Christmas, take heart, because she is still the mother of God whose journey to Bethlehem we will celebrate once again on Wednesday night. She will still be Mother Mary, meek and mild. I do, in fact, have the utmost respect and admiration for Mary despite the fact that today's passage records not God's invitation to Mary, but God's annunciation, God's declaring of the way it is going to be, rather than the way God hopes it will turn out if Mary will only say yes. Indeed, the good news of the Gospel is revealed almost as much in Mary as in her son, in that Mary is evidence of the profoundly unmerited favor of God to someone who doesn't even need to say yes to receive it. Mary is favored by God whether she likes it or even wants it. That fact is announced before anything else takes place in Mary's life, or our own. You see, if we are not careful with our doctrine of grace, of leaving it all in God's heart, hands, and voice, our choices for God become the means by which God saves us, rather than the means by which we live our lives grateful for being favored by God. Let me say that again because it is a little challenging: if we are not careful with our doctrine of grace, of favor, of leaving it *all* in God's heart, hands, and voice, our choices for God become the means by which God saves us,

rather than the means by which we live our lives grateful for being favored by God.

You may never have pondered the theological consequences of what it means to say that you have accepted Christ as your savior, but Mary provides an opportunity to do just that. Reading tonight's passage in Luke makes it very difficult to believe that Mary somehow activated God's grace when she says, "Let it be," that she became acceptable by saying yes to God, by choosing God. There are some traditions in the Christian Church that walk a fine line on this issue, placing a greater emphasis on our affirmation of God's invitation to grace as a condition for receiving it, rather than our resignation to God's grace already bestowed. It is rather like the difference between saying that I was saved on a date like December 21, 1988, or that I was saved two thousand years ago. In the case of citing a specific date, the emphasis is dangerously closer to my action than God's action, that I am somehow responsible for my own salvation, that I can maybe even hold it back by simply waiting to say "yes." We may not think about it in these terms, but what this can imply if we are not careful is that if salvation is ours to gain by the speaking of our "yes," it is also ours to lose. I, for one, am very good at losing things, just ask my wife about my car keys, and so I am very grateful that neither gaining nor or losing God's favor is really in my power.

I hope what I have been saying does not sound too much like splitting theological hairs, but in my experience, I have found it at least as common to find

Christians perpetually concerned with the state of their soul, or the souls of others, as to find them living grateful and generous lives rejoicing in the fact of our favor. As people from a culture that cherishes personal control over our individual lives, the notion that my salvation has nothing to do with me can be a little disquieting. But when we remember Mary's "Let it be," her inspired resignation to the fact that God loved and favored her for no apparent or extraordinary reason, perhaps the notion that there is something over which we really have no control is actually cause for celebration. Maybe then we can cooperate with that favor, and truly enjoy it, rather than looking over our shoulders for evidence that we've somehow screwed it up and lost it, or missed our one chance. As a pastor, I have experienced people so twisted up inside about whether they, or the people they love, are going to make it into heaven, that they miss the wonder of a graceful experience like Mary's, and the beauty of a life lived confident of God's power to love them even if they are not perfect. If there were ever someone to fear not being good enough for God's purposes, it would be the un-extraordinary Mary, and yet Gabriel comes unbidden to her with the words we all so much long to hear, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

There may be better words to describe Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement that "resignation," but I couldn't come up with any. It may not be an inspiring word, but that doesn't mean it is not a positive one. Would that more of God's favored ones be resigned to the grace that has been assigned to them, to

simply accept it to live in love and peace and service. Friends, just like to Mary, God announces to us still today that we are favored, that we have a role to play. It may not come from the lips of Gabriel, but that doesn't mean it goes unsaid. And whenever, and wherever, or as often as we may hear it, may we respond with the same "Let it be" that made Mary's resignation worth remembering after all these years. Amen.