

Mary's Yes
Luke 1:26-56
John Breon

Luke begins his Gospel by telling about the events surrounding the births of *two* babies. John, the *prophet* of the Most High was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke also introduces a relative of Elizabeth's, a girl named Mary. To her will be born Jesus, the *Son* of the Most High.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sends the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. The angel appears to Mary, who is a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. Receiving a visit from God's angel means that she has a special place in God's plan. She's going to be involved in the great acts of God that bring salvation.

In a dramatic reading of this account, Gabriel startles Mary. After she gets over her surprise the angel says, "And God would like to ask you a favor. God would like you to join him in giving birth to his Son."

"God is asking me to do that?"

"Yes."

"Does God have to ask?"

"God always asks."

(William Griffin, told by Jim Buskirk, "Mary, Mother of Our Lord," tape, 12/2/90, First UMC, Tulsa)

In the book *Prayers*, a person is struggling with saying "yes" to God. Part of God's response is, "I need your 'yes' as I needed Mary's 'yes' to come to earth..." (Michel Quoist, *Prayers* 123).

Ken Gire, in "An Intimate Moment with Mary and Joseph," describes Jesus' birth: "The involuntary contractions are not enough, and Mary has to push with all her strength, almost as if God were refusing to come into the world without her help" (*Intimate Moments with the Savior* 4).

God asked Mary to take part in this great miracle. God's invitation and Mary's response show us something of the wonder and joy and pain that accompanied God's Son coming into the world. This story also shows us something of God's invitation to us and our response to God.

Mary is a model of discipleship. Luke portrays her as favored of God, thoughtful, obedient, believing, worshipful, and devoted to Jewish law and piety. But none of those qualities is the reason God chose her. God's choice of Mary is grace. The reasons for it lie hidden in God's purposes (Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*). "God has given his favor to one who had no claim to worthy status, raised her up from a position of lowliness, and has chosen her to have a central role in salvation history" (Joel Green, *New International Commentary New Testament: Luke*).

The angel tells Mary that she will have a son. She is to name him Jesus, which means he is the Savior. This little child will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be the Messiah, reigning on David's throne. His kingdom will never end.

What an amazing surprise this news is. The realization of the prophets' dreams, the fulfillment of every Jewish mother's hopes—Mary is in on it. Her baby is the one who will fulfill all those hopes and dreams—and more.

The most amazing and surprising thing about this is that it can't happen. "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Mary can't have a baby. Though she and Joseph were pledged to be married, they were not yet together and she had not "been with" another man.

Luke emphasizes in this story that Mary was a virgin (vv. 27, 34). His point is not so much about Mary as about her child. Jesus' coming into the world is a miracle. His birth was normal and natural like anyone's. But he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The word translated "virgin" here can mean a young woman. And Mary probably was a teenager. But Luke is not simply telling us that she was young. He is pointing to one of God's wonderful acts that is part of God's coming into the world in a unique way.

In answer to Mary's question, "How will this be?" the angel tells her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." God's Spirit, who was present and active at Creation (Gen. 1:2), is present and active in the New Creation. In a mysterious and miraculous way, God performs a creative act and the Child is conceived in

Mary. The Lord God of the universe squeezes into a human cell and becomes one of us. A new creation begins.

The Holy Spirit continues the work of new creation in us. When we place our faith and trust in God through Jesus, we are born anew and Christ dwells in us, making us children of God. Remember the line from the hymn:

Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today

As a sign to Mary, the angel tells her about Elizabeth. Though she had been unable to have children and was getting old, she was now six months pregnant. "Because," the angel said, "nothing is impossible with God." Abraham and Sarah had heard something similar: "Nothing is too hard for the Lord" (Gen. 18:14). Another way to translate this verse in Luke is, "No word from God will ever fail." God's promises will be fulfilled. God does not merely speak, but God has power to do what he says.

Where do you need to hear this in your life? What impossible situations do you face? Our impossibilities are opportunities for God to show his power, to create new possibilities. Bring your need to God and hear this word: "No word of God is impossible." God's purpose and promises will be fulfilled.

Now listen to Mary's response. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." She humbly put herself in God's hands and accepted God's plan. She opened herself up to the wonders of God, to pain and struggle, and to great joy. Mary and many others would continue to be amazed at what God would do and at her Child, Jesus, and all that he would say and do.

But look at what else Mary was getting herself into by saying yes to God. She was risking shame, misunderstanding from Joseph and her community, the loss of her reputation by being an unwed mother, the curse of being considered a sinful woman, even the possibility of death by stoning. That's the penalty the law called for in such a situation (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Mary risked all of this as she surrendered to God's will.

It seemed too much to ask
of one small virgin
that she should stake shame
against the will of God ...
and it seems much too much
to ask you, or me,
to be part of the
different thing—
God's shocking, unorthodox,
unheard of thing,
to further heaven's hopes
and summon God's glory
(Lucy Shaw)

But when we do take the risk and say yes to God, like Mary we find that we receive joy and glory also. God's Son would become a human through Mary. God's Messiah, the Liberator and King, would come with salvation and blessing.

Mary's joy is expressed as she visits Elizabeth. She went from Nazareth down to Judea to be with Elizabeth and to talk about the wondrous things that were happening. As so often in Luke, these two women are inspired to speak prophetic praise about what God was doing in and through their lives.

Let's slow down with Luke and listen to the words of these two women. Notice the blessings that Elizabeth pronounces on Mary.

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.
*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

That last line invites others to respond, like Mary, with faith.
Then Mary, inspired by God's Spirit, sings a song of praise.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
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,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

After this magnificent outburst of praise and prophecy, Luke returns to the story's details. "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home" (v. 56). That is, she stayed until John was born, probably helping Elizabeth and Zechariah get ready. Perhaps she was thinking of how to tell Joseph about all this and what to do when she got back to Nazareth.

Mary, in her response to God, helps us say yes to God. Let's join her in receiving God's promises. Will we say "yes" with Mary to God's call and God's promises? Will we join her in believing that what the Lord has said will be fulfilled?

If we do, then we will know the pain and the struggle, we will know what it is to be a servant, and we will know the joy that Elizabeth and Mary knew.

When I was in college, I discovered a devotional book called *Prayers* by Michel Quoist. I think the first reading from it I heard was this one: "Help Me to Say 'Yes.'"

I am afraid of saying "Yes," Lord.
Where will you take me?
I am afraid of drawing the longer straw,
I am afraid of signing my name to an unread agreement,
I am afraid of the "yes" that entails other "yeses."

And yet I am not at peace.
You pursue me, Lord, you beseege me.
I seek out the din for fear of hearing you, but in a moment of silence
you slip through.
I turn from the road, for I have caught sight of you, but at the end of
the path you are there awaiting me.
Where shall I hide? I meet you everywhere.
Is it then impossible to escape you?

But I am afraid to say "Yes," Lord.
I am afraid of putting my hand in yours, for you hold on to it.
I am afraid of meeting your eyes, for you can win me.
I am afraid of your demands, for you are a jealous God.
I am hemmed in, yet I hide.
I am captured, yet I struggle, and I fight knowing that I am defeated.
For you are the stronger, Lord, you own the world and you take it
from me.
When I stretch out my hand to catch hold of people and things,
they vanish before my eyes.
It's no fun, Lord, I can't keep anything for myself.
The flower I pick fades in my hands.

My laugh freezes on my lips.
The waltz I dance leaves me restless and uneasy.
Everything seems empty,
Everything seems hollow,
You have made a desert around me.
I am hungry and thirsty,
And the whole world cannot satisfy me.

And yet I loved you, Lord; what have I done to you?
I worked for you; I gave myself for you.
O great and terrible God,
What more do you want?

Son, I want more for you and for the world.
Until now you have planned your actions, but I have no need of them.
You have asked for my approval, you have asked for my support,
 You have wanted to interest me in your work.
But don't you see, son, that you were reversing the roles?
I have watched you, I have seen your good will,
And I want more than you, now.
You will no longer do your own works, but the will of your Father in
 heaven.

Say "Yes," son.
I need your "yes" as I needed Mary's "yes" to come to earth,
For it is I who must do your work,
It is I who must live in your family,
It is I who must be in your neighborhood, and not you.
For it is my look that penetrates, and not yours,
My words that carry weight, and not yours,
My life that transforms, and not yours.
Give all to me, abandon all to me.
I need your "yes" to be united with you and to come down to earth,
I need your "yes" to continue saving the world!

O Lord, I am afraid of your demands, but who can resist you?
That your Kingdom may come and not mine,
That your will may be done and not mine,
Help me to say "Yes."

(Michel Quoist, *Prayers*, Sheed and Ward, 1963, 120-23)