

SAYING YES TO GOD

1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Luke 1:39-55

I remember having a conversation when I was a young teenager with a couple people, including the music director, at my church. Our music director was a wonderfully talented woman; she conducted the adult choir, a youth choir, and a children's choir. She ran a children's theatre group out of our church. She wrote and directed unique short plays for the Sunday school to put on as part of our worship services. She was also an incredible sewer and had made a set of 4 beautiful banners that hung in the sanctuary during Advent. And this was just her participation in our church community. She was also a full time lawyer and a mother of 4, on top of many other roles, I'm sure.

This conversation I was a part of with her was during Advent. Perhaps we were looking at the banners on the wall, or talking about a particular piece of music—I can't recall exactly what now—but at some point, the conversation turned to Mary being pregnant with Jesus. And without a hint of irony, our music director said "I hope God never asks me to do something like that—I'm too busy."

Seems fair, in hindsight. She was an incredibly busy, active and engaged person. But to my naive teenage ears, I was shocked at what she had said. She was so much a part of our church life. She was such a faith-filled person. She gave of herself in so many ways. If God really truly asked her to do something as important as carry the baby Jesus, how could she possibly say no? How could she deny God like that? If God asked me to do something that big, I thought, I would definitely say yes.

Ah, the innocence of youth. And yet, perhaps we could all use a little more of that youthful naiveté in our lives. Perhaps we all could learn to say "yes" a little more often. And not "yes" to the things that will make us busier; "yes" to that which opens us up to God and what God is calling us to—things that are already within our capacity if we just take notice. We make it so easy for ourselves to be busy. And that busyness can be a positive or a negative thing, but it also often becomes our excuse for not slowing down. And when we don't ever slow down we miss so much around us. We miss opportunities for the sacred to enter more deeply into our ordinary lives.

In our scripture today we find that Mary has travelled a long way to visit her relative, Elizabeth, to share the news of what God is doing through her. Just previous to this Mary had been visited by an angel who told her that she would have God's son. Mary felt disbelief, not because she doubted God's presence or power, but rather, because not only was she a virgin, but she was also just a poor servant girl. But the angel said to Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, that God's power would come over her, and because of this, the child she would bear would be holy and called the Son of God. And with that explanation, Mary says yes to God; she says yes to her ordinary life being completely turned around and for this incredible gift to be born through her.

Because of her “yes”, Mary would become not only a mother, but the mother of Jesus. An ordinary life was made sacred by way of an invitation that she affirmed. Her life was deepened but the shape of it remained mostly the same: she would still give birth, she would still feed and care for a baby, often waking in the middle of the night to do so, she would still rock her babe to sleep, and she would still turn her life toward her child’s. The difference is that her attention would be turned toward the child who was Jesus. When Mary said “yes,” she welcomed God into the content of her already given life. And in doing so, her life as a lowly servant girl was deepened, was turned around into one where she had great honour: the ordinary made sacred.

So it is with our lives. When we say “yes,” God is most often inviting us to what is already within our capacity—inviting us to see our ordinary roles as sacred, as connected to God, as dedicated to a higher purpose. But of course, when we are focused only on leading our busy or active or fast-flowing lives, it is difficult to imagine how the sacred fits between work and getting the car to the mechanic and picking up kids and walking the dog and getting exercise and attending holiday events and purchasing Christmas gifts, and, and, and... Where is the sacred in our everyday living? How can we take notice? How can we say “yes” and let life be sacred?

If we use Mary as our example, can we really expect our ordinary lives to go from lowly to honoured the way hers does? Well, not exactly. But what Mary does do is make a choice; a choice to say “yes” to God. And connecting the ordinary to God and making it sacred is a choice we can make, too. When Mary said “yes,” a new possibility, a new way, a new kind of living was born from her in Jesus. When we say “yes” new possibilities are born in us, as well, and we deepen the lives we have already been given. And maybe what we most need to invite in and affirm isn’t more, but less. Maybe it’s not about moving faster, but slowing down. Maybe it’s not about producing more, but reflecting more.

This slowing down and reflecting is incorporated right into our gospel reading. Like an aria in an opera or a duet in a musical, Mary’s Song, which is also called the Magnificat, pauses the action in order to celebrate God’s greatness. Her song tells of how God displays God’s greatness and faithfulness by displacing the proud and the powerful, sending the rich away empty handed. Luke’s gospel has many signs that point to a change in status, to the idea that, through Christ, things will be turned upside down. Mary’s song gives voice to this subversive incarnation. This young, unwed, pregnant woman—a thoroughly marginalized person in her culture—proclaims prophetic words and invites all who hear to take notice of what God is doing and how God is doing it; of the promises God has made and keeps; of the good that God is doing not through power as a show of force, but as a way to remind Israel that they belong to God and can count on God to help; to remind us that the lowly will be lifted high. Despite external systems and forces that work against this young woman, in her heart Mary is freed. She says this right at the start of her song with the words, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant” (Luke 1:46-48a). Saying “yes” isn’t an extra burden for Mary, but a form of liberation from that which suppresses her within. She

feels blessed in a way she has never felt before; she is awakened to God's grace and is inspired by what God is doing through her and in the world, even if what's coming isn't totally clear yet.

This story doesn't only focus on Mary, it is also very much about Elizabeth. Mary may be carrying God's holy child, but Elizabeth carries an important child, as well—the child who would become John the Baptist, the messenger who would announce (and already is announcing, even from the womb) the coming of the Saviour, Jesus. Elizabeth, too, is living a life that, through her pregnancy, has been turned upside down. Elizabeth could have reacted to Mary's arrival at her home with disdain: after all, Mary was pregnant and unmarried. But Elizabeth knows what it's like to feel shame and exclusion: in a time and place where a woman's most significant and important role was to bear children, Elizabeth had lived much of her life seen merely as an infertile wife. Elizabeth's response to her miraculous pregnancy emphasizes that God's grace has reversed her social status. She says, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). At long last, in her old age, she is an honourable married woman, pregnant with her husband's son. And as for Mary, her child's status as "Son of the Most High" elevates her status. Both women's social positions have been flipped around in the very way that God often flips things: the humble become the esteemed.

But more than just this, through their pregnancies, through their mutual esteem, through their decision to come together, these women receive something they both had been lacking: community and connection. God removes their isolation and helps them to understand themselves more fully as part of something larger than their individual destinies. Together, they are known more fully, and begin to see more clearly than they do as individuals. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthian church, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). Paul tells us that our mirror-like observations will one day become face-to-face visions, our partial knowledge will become full, but only in the context of God's love. While Mary and Elizabeth have been awakened to God's love in a totally new way, neither fully understand what is to come. But the knowledge they seek is rooted in God's love. And through that love they have found one another, two individuals who are reanimated by community and connection and an end to their isolation. They affirm one another's choice to say "yes" to what God is doing through them and open their hearts more fully to the liberating, blessing ways of God. Together they confirm the hope that will come and the fulfillment of God's promise.

While opening our hearts more fully to God's presence and to the sacred in the everyday can deeply impact each of us as individuals, that community and connection that Mary and Elizabeth experience is key to encountering life in the context of God's love, in a sacred way. Perhaps saying "yes" means connecting more deeply with the people around us; with those next to us in the pews, those we gather with on Zoom, those we support in the greater community, those who run the missions in our city that provide much needed support for many families and individuals, those whose

backgrounds and stories are totally different from our own and who we can show love to even just by listening. Or perhaps we need to take notice of those we rely on in order to see what is possible—those who make us slow down, who pause the action so we might join together in a duet, who stand by to assist with the birthing of new potential, who remind us to partner with one another instead of moving obstinately into further isolation. In these people, in these moments, the ordinary becomes sacred.

Saying “yes” to God should not be a burden or an extra thing to add to the to-do list. It is taking stock of what is weighing us down and hardening our hearts, and saying “yes” to that which opens our hearts and frees us from the weight we feel within. It is a hopeful expectation that starts out slowly and quietly. We anticipate its growth and full manifestation, but we do not yet experience it. It is seeing our ordinary lives as something sacred, as something connected to God. And it is allowing new possibilities to be born in us today.

Through Elizabeth, John was born: a servant of God and messenger to all people.
Through Mary, Jesus was born: the Son of the Most High and our salvation through unending love.

What is born in you today? What will you say “yes” to?