

Worship in Hope: Mary's Yes
Isa. 11:1-9 Luke 1:26-38

Last year about this time our daughter Terry, her husband Sam, and their 5 year old son, Nathaniel were planning to visit us. The week before Terry let me know that Nathaniel had been talking non-stop about "the Christmas train".

Now the "Christmas train" is this annoying little plastic train that runs on batteries, and is hard to put together. It runs in a circle and plays tunes while it travels the track. It stays in a box in the top of the hall closet for most of the year.

Well, Terry, Sam and Nathaniel arrived at our house. Within 15 minutes Nathaniel came to me and asked "Papa, can we put up the Christmas train?" I looked at him, paused and said "Yes. Why don't we do that right now." Well, he was stunned. Adults never say "yes", they always say "not now", "maybe later" and so on.

Well, his eyes got big, his mouth fell open, he raised his arms in the air and shouted "That's what I'm talking about!"

The power of a "yes" is very real.

Our Gospel story begins with one person who says "yes". It all starts with Mary. The story cannot get very far with Mary, and her "yes".

Over the centuries Mary has been pictured in numerous ways. I borrowed a book with art work focused on Mary, the mother of Jesus. In some scenes she is clearly a village girl: simple clothes, doing chores, her hair out of place, sweat on her face. In others paintings she looks like royalty in a gorgeous gown and jeweled crown hovering over her head. Some show her with breath-taking beauty; or glowing with humility; or a halo showing sainthood already achieved. Some paintings show her face already haunted by sorrow, knowing that her heart will be broken by the path this child will take.

We all know some of the things that happened to this village girl once the traditions of the ancient church took hold. She got promoted to perpetual virgin; then to "theotokos", mother of God. Then to Queen of Heaven. Not bad for a 15 year old from the nowhere town of Nazareth, engaged to a man named Joe. By the time Martin Luther and John Calvin came along with the Reformation, Mary was edging her way into the Trinity.

Now those protestant reformers threw out the statues of Mary, and the prayers of the rosary offered to her. But in the process, the mother got thrown out with the bath water. Mary almost disappeared from our story, showing up only briefly, once a year in a Christmas pageant.

But there is a whole lot more to Mary than a bit part in a children's play. Mary is the first one in the Gospels to say "yes" to God's plans. When Moses was called at the burning bush, he argued with God that he was not the right choice. When Isaiah was confronted by a vision in the temple, he declared that he was not worthy to speak God's words. When Jeremiah was called, he protested that he was too young to be drafted by the Almighty. But Mary overcomes her fear and says "yes, let it be to me according to your word."

Mary, you see, is the first disciple of Jesus the Christ. She is the first one to say "yes" to what God intended. She is the one who will watch and ponder these things in her heart as a

prophet named Simeon confirms the boy's destiny. She watches as Jesus as a young man says strange things standing in the Temple like "I must be about my father's business."

Her "yes" got her an all expenses paid trip to Bethlehem, where the angels sang and strangers showed up with gifts. And then a long, slow journey to Golgotha and Pentecost. If you turn to the first chapter of Acts, you find Mary the mother of Jesus in that upper room with all the rest of the disciples. Mary, the first disciple, the first one to say "yes" is there at the end as well.

All of this was quite a surprise to Mary. The angel came looking for Mary.

C.S. Lewis once wrote "there comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly (frightened); was that real footstep in the hall?"

There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ...suddenly draw back. Suppose we really found God? We never meant it to come to that. Worse still, suppose God has found us? "

Suppose God came looking and found us, that the Almighty had plans that did not match our plans? Suppose the angel interrupted our careful schedule to tell us that something big was going down, and we are needed? What would our answer be?

Ann Weems puts the question into a poem.

"In each heart lies a Bethlehem,

An inn where we must ultimately answer whether there is room or not...

this Advent let us go to Bethlehem and find our kneeling places."

The Gospel says that God is looking for us; that God has sent out a search party in the person of Jesus. We are here because we have heard the rustle of angel's wings. And so the question comes to each of us: is there room in our lives to say "yes" to God's plans.

But let us be careful. Let us consider our answer carefully.

It might cost us some money, this yes of ours. But that is no big deal. We are generous people. We are used to sharing some of what we have because we know that God is good and good to us. God provides and we share. Nobody is so stingy that they keep it all to themselves. Even the old innkeeper found some room for the visitors in his stable.

This yes might cost us some time. Now that begins to be a problem. We already have more than we can handle. Our calendars are full and our Google back up keeps bringing in more. We barely get any time to ourselves as it is. So let us be careful here. For God has this strange notion that he gives our time to us, and that he has some say over where it goes.

This yes might change our goals. It might set us on a new path that we did not expect; did not look for. Or it might simply change the why and wherefore of the one we are on now. Surely saying yes to someone who is "the son of the Most High...sitting on the throne of his father David" is bound to turn some things upside down. So let us consider our answer carefully.

But answer we must. It is either yes or no.

One of my seminary professors said that he always approached preaching with great trepidation, because no one leaves the same. Either we move a little closer to the God who calls, or we move a little farther away. But no one is left in the same place.

The question is out there. The angel will not go away. We are the ones who must answer.

While researching this sermon, I came across a quote from Dag Hammarskjöld. He was the secretary general of the United Nations in the late 50's. The cold war was building. Nuclear weapons were spreading. The devastation of World War II was still seen in many places. He was a relentless worker for peace and reconciliation.

He kept a journal which was found after his death. He called it his "negotiations with self and with God." In an entry in 1961 he wrote "At some moment I did answer "yes" to Someone or Something and from that hour I was certain that (my) existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender, had a goal." So he gave his life to seek peace between the nations.

God's question is out there. We must answer.

Some hear the question in moments as mystical as any found in Scripture. In a moment they are confronted with a presence beyond their knowing, and a call to follow. And they say yes.

Others hear the question in the crying need of some around them. In the suffering of others they discover that they are being asked to respond. And they say yes.

Some hear the question in the midst of incredible beauty, in music or art or nature, and a moment of joy that leaves them changed forever. And they say yes.

God's question pursues us until we answer with our lives.

Mary opens the Gospel story with her yes to God. Now it is our turn. We can help the story continue with our own answer to the eternal question.

Do we want God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Do we want this Jesus of Nazareth on the throne of his father David, and on the throne of our own little kingdoms?

Do we want to see the lion lie down with the lamb, and the earth full of the knowledge and fear of the Lord?

Are we ready for stables to become as holy as churches; for street people to be as valued as Wall Street people; for forgiveness to be the currency of our community; and for sacrifice to be the privilege of the faithful?

The question is put to us.

Hail O favored ones, the Lord is with you!

Now we must consider what sort of greeting this may be; and what sort of answer we intend to give to God with us, Emmanuel.

Let it be yes so that God may exclaim "Now that's what I'm talking about".

Dr. Charlie Summers

Think of one place this week where you want to say "yes" to God; "yes" to something good, open, trusting, self-giving.

