

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (288)

How did Mary win such favor with God? I've wondered that from time to time. Have you?

I wasn't given much opportunity to wonder about Mary when I was younger. A Protestant, I wasn't ever encouraged to, which is a loss. Protestants have impoverished themselves for not paying much attention to Mary. We're correcting for that, here and there.

If I had been given occasion to, though, I wonder what I would have made of her having found favor with God. It might well have tormented me. I was a little sister, after all: a little sister to a big sister so I know what coming in second feels like.

That's the irony of it, though. That's the *tragedy*. I imagine the quality of Mary that inspired favor was something that couldn't be competed with, just by its nature. Have you ever tried competing with someone who simply isn't competing with you? It's really hard.

So, Mary, I imagine, was self-possessed. She *must* have been. She was composed in such a way that she wasn't about comparing, to say nothing of competing. She was singular, as we all are or might be. But at fourteen? Fifteen? We marvel at her virginity, as if that was the impossible thing. I marvel at her maturity. I'm fifty years old and I still can barely manage it.

So, I'd have found a way, probably—to compete with her, or at least to compare myself to her. From what I understand, generations of women have—pious women who just want to be

good. So, they look to Mary, who must certainly have been good. Isn't that how you find favor with God?

Maybe.

I've been watching "The Crown," though just season four. This is a tv show that focuses on the long reign of Queen Elizabeth. Season four has us in the 80s, when Diana entered the House of Windsor. People had been talking about it on Twitter, so I decided to check it out.

The first couple episodes play like a horror movie, the slow move of something predacious but domesticated, highly civilized but very dangerous. According to that telling of it, Diana first met Charles when she was a quite young sixteen years old, the younger sister of an older sister whom Charles was courting.

The future king of England standing in her foyer.

Diana didn't stand a chance.

Imagine that much power approaching you. How would you handle it?

It is a live issue, believe it or not, whether Mary really, honestly said "yes" here. To this proposal from God, which came via the angel Gabriel, Mary's response, whether or not her "Yes" was actually "Yes," is a live issue—and not just now during this #metoo era, which I fully support, by the way, because, well, "me too." As for Mary, I remember hearing about it in divinity school, which was twenty years ago. This: was, indeed, Mary good with all this?

Because, isn't the imbalance of power simply too extreme to presume Mary had any agency here at all, any capacity to decide, really and truly, yes or no?

The King of the Universe, standing in your foyer. Did Mary stand a chance?

Okay, it was a messenger thereof, not the actual King himself. An angel, Gabriel, which isn't nothing. For a while a few weeks ago images of angels were big on Instagram. Jack was tracking the trend. People would draw angels based on how they'd been described in scripture and other classical texts, all eyes and wings and flames. The images were of something terrifying, not Hallmark card versions, not cherubs, but of something (again) you might see in a horror movie—though approaching a person with this as a greeting, "Be not afraid." That was the joke. That was the irony. "Be not afraid? Yeah, right. Then be less frightening."

It's a good conversation to have, I suppose. The way power plays out in the world is good to keep a steady, critical eye on—no less in the church than anywhere else. It is beyond dispute that

the church, and its clergy, have gotten this wrong from time to time, sometimes grossly, criminally, destructively wrong. So, to consider how power is said to play out in texts we regard as sacred or authoritative is also good to keep a critical eye on, which unless we can do so, engage it critically, it's best not to engage it at all. I have colleagues who'd aim not even to feature this passage in worship to stand on its own, so worried are that Mary was coerced, that not until Mary went to Elizabeth, which she's remembered to have done in the very next scene according to Luke, is Mary actually free again and joyful in her new life.

As for me, though, to be honest, that worry seems off the mark. It seemed so in divinity school when I hardly had the language for it because it wasn't ever something I'd considered before. It seems so now as I can speak to it. It seems off the mark because it misconstrues God—God who is power and also is love.

Love.

See, absolute power is present here, is indeed at play, but so is absolute love—and love *cannot* coerce, love certainly can't rape. Love is powerful in its being mutually empowering, empowering of both parties, the lover and the beloved. Love is the most appealing thing, which makes it freely offered to be freely received, or not. Its utter appeal means it doesn't have to coerce, though utter appeal does make it hard to resist. But that difficulty in resisting isn't about fear or coercion or seduction or deception. It's not about exploitation or menace or the objectification of the other, and it's certainly not about violence. It's because love is the thing that life desires more than anything else, desires most truly and absolutely, such that when presented with love, the only and true answer is yes.

Really, that might be how you tell it is love: because your answer to it is an unequivocal, utter, and absolute “Yes.”

This is actually a chief piece of advice I offer the boys as they enter adolescence and begin to hope for love to come from people beyond their family of origin. “Be with people whose ‘Yes’ you trust is ‘Yes.’ Be a person whose ‘Yes’ is ‘Yes.’ And be a person who can be told ‘No.’”

I find I believe Mary found favor with God because she was a person who could have said no. Indeed, God, being God, needed someone who was free enough, and unflappable enough, to say “No” if the answer was no—unflappable even in the face of such potentially overwhelming power, *especially* in the face of such potentially overwhelming power.

In order for God to be God, God *had* to approach someone who could refuse, who had the capacity to refuse. Thus, Mary found favor with God.

After all, God, who is power, was nonetheless asking a pretty favor here, not to be funny about it, but to just to consider it from all directions. God came to Mary in some need, which is quite an astonishing thing because it compromises that otherwise utter power, a compromise being a “promise with,” a compromise being not something that can be realized autonomously but only in relationship—and there’s a vulnerability there, there’s a *need*. Which suggests something strange about the power of God—it is the power of love, the sort of power that can only be realized in relationship, in true and mutual and freely chosen relationship.

This means God needed someone who could honestly say yes to this needful approach, or no. And this suggests something about Mary that inspired God’s favor.

So, we can take her at her word. We can hear in her yes, “Yes.” “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Phew. We can believe her. We can trust her, just as God did. We can trust her that she will freely, even joyfully, carry this story to term—this story which we need perhaps now more than ever, which I in any event need now more than ever. Indeed, Mary (being Mary) would (I suspect) intend for us nothing less than that she happily carries to term this life that we need, and that God needs. It’s why I always label it, this section of the Christmas story in the Christmas Eve bulletin: “Mary said yes.” We can trust her, and thus set aside the worry that power is playing out abusively, exploitatively here. We can reserve that worry for other occasions, which, sad to say, yet arise, and meanwhile, this morning, trust that Mary said yes, and we can wonder whether, if Mary said yes, so might we?

So might you...?

How is God arriving to be born in you today? How is love approaching to be born in you today?

Our countdown continues, is in the single digits. Five days until Christmas, that day when it might anyway feel that nothing much has changed. It feels a bit like that every year—when we hope for peace on earth and good will toward all people, all creation; and what we receive is a new sweater, a new tie, the company of people we care about or try to care about, and if nothing else some distraction, some busyness. Christmas, the way we do it, is always like winning the

consolation prize, high hopes met with (if we're lucky) gifts under a tree. This year, though, even the consolation prizes won't, by and large, show up. What, then, shall we console ourselves with?

The story. This story in which we live and move and have our being, and which lives and moves and has being in us—our hearts, our minds, our widening imaginations. The happy carrying and joyful arrival of something unexpected, of something quiet and slow that has the power to change everything. It might seem less than what we usually have. We might find it more than we've ever allowed ourselves to receive.

Find in your hearts “yes.”

Thanks be to God.