

“Praying”

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“Christmas (Re)Actions—Responding to God’s Invitation”

by the Rev. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

December 12, 2021—Third Sunday of Advent

Psalm 143:1, 8-10 (Common English Bible)

¹ Listen to my prayer, LORD! Because of your faithfulness, hear my requests for mercy!

Because of your righteousness, answer me!...

⁸ Tell me all about your faithful love come morning time, because I trust you.

Show me the way I should go, because I offer my life up to you.

⁹ Deliver me from my enemies, LORD! I seek protection from you.

¹⁰ Teach me to do what pleases you, because you are my God. Guide me by your good spirit into good land.

Luke 1:26-38 (Contemporary English Version)

²⁶ One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee ²⁷ with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. ²⁸ The angel greeted Mary and said, “You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was confused by the angel’s words and wondered what they meant. ³⁰ Then the angel told Mary, “Don’t be afraid! God is pleased with you, ³¹ and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. ³³ He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen? I am not married!”

³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God’s power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. ³⁶ Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God!”

³⁸ Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant! Let it happen as you have said.” And the angel left her.

This familiar episode in the story of the birth of Jesus is often referred to as the “Annunciation.” It’s called that because the angel Gabriel “announced” news to a young, betrothed woman named Mary. The startling, unprecedented news he told her was that God had chosen her to give birth to one who would grow to be humanity’s savior. Pretty heady stuff. That’s a lot to take in. Mary couldn’t have anticipated anything like that.

She was just a typical young woman in Nazareth, a tiny Galilean village of maybe a hundred people. As was the custom, through the decision of their families Mary had been promised in marriage to Joseph; she didn’t have any say in the decision. A betrothal was as firm a legal contract as any. In the months ahead she might meet her betrothed at gatherings of their two families. But she wouldn’t live with him or have any intimacy with him until after the wedding ceremony which would happen perhaps a year or several years in the future.

So how was it that a typical girl from a small village off the beaten path became the subject of an angelic annunciation? What happened? What did that look like? Was there a spotlight blinding Mary? Were Gabriel and Mary standing in a pool of light surrounded by darkness? Was there music? Utter silence? Did Gabriel wait until Mary

was alone so there would be no witnesses and people would have to take her word for it?

Gabriel's annunciation to Mary followed a formula found in birth announcements in the Old Testament: "the angel says, 'Do not be afraid,' calls the recipient of the vision by name, assures [her] of God's favor, announces the birth of the child, discloses the name of the child to be born, and reveals the future role of the child...."¹

Although the Bible says she was "confused" when Gabriel told her "you are truly blessed" and that "God is with you," Mary didn't seem particularly afraid. For that matter, it wasn't proper in those days for a stranger to approach a woman, but again, Mary didn't seem afraid. Was she too young to know enough to be afraid?

Perhaps her receptivity to the angel and his message is explained by her response at the end of the episode. Remember what she said? Mary said to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said."²

Mary had her whole life in front of her. She was contracted to be married in the next year or so. She'd be leaving her parents' home and joining her husband's family. And now she learned that the blessing of motherhood would come upon her even before the consummation of the marriage contract?

How could she handle all that?

Mary could deal with all that because she possessed a spirit of godly submission. She understood that her life was not her own. Her life was God's gift for her to use to fulfill God's will: "Let it happen as you have said."

Submission is an unpopular word in our culture. It might suggest weakness, kinkiness, sometimes abuse. But as we see in the example of young Mary of Nazareth, submission can be a sign of strength, not weakness; submission can be an expression of trust, of obedience, of faith.

A monumental American theologian of the last century was a man at the University of Chicago Divinity School named Paul Tillich. Tillich captured the significance of Mary's submission to God when he wrote, "Faith means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms and heals us. Surrender to this power is faith."³

Submission is not something that is easy for most of us. We live in a culture where we're encouraged to be self-reliant, to be independent-minded, to become take-charge types.

...Our systems, religious as well as secular, work on the principle of individual gratification: self-awareness, self-improvement, self-esteem. We believe in "being true to yourself," "finding your own way," "standing up for yourself," buying or willing your way into an identity.⁴

¹ *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX—*Luke-John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 50

² Luke 1:38 Contemporary English Version

³ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Scribner's, 1955), Chapter 5, in *Homiletics.com/illustrations*, accessed 12/2/2021

⁴ Sara Miles, "My soul proclaims: Submission and subversion in Mary's *Magnificat*," *Journey with Jesus*, December 16, 2007. *journeywithjesus.net*. Retrieved May 30, 2019. *Homiletics.com/illustrations*, accessed 12/2/2021

The very idea of being submissive is anathema... unless we're obeying parents or teachers, law enforcement, of course, or bosses or coaches. Even that can be challenging. Someone as accomplished and powerful as former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach struggled to submit to his coach, the legendary Tom Landry. Staubach admitted that his position as a quarterback who didn't call his own signals was a source of trial for him. Coach Landry sent in every play. He told Roger when to pass, when to run, and only in emergency situations could [Staubach] change the play (and he had better be right!). Even though Roger considered coach Landry to have a "genius mind" when it came to football strategy, pride said that he should be able to run his own team. Roger later said, "I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey, there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory."⁵

When Staubach embraced the idea of submitting to his coach, he was able to lead his team to two pro football championships.

I suggest that there's a familiar word for this act of submitting, of offering your life to God. That word is "praying." Praying is not merely a series of spiritual-sounding sentences or memorized verse. Praying is putting yourself in a condition of submission – of offering to God all that you are. In a spirit of prayer – whether using words or simply resting in God's presence – in a spirit of prayer you offer yourself to God with the desire that God's plan, God's purpose, God's will may come closer to fruition through your actions, your words, your attitude.

Two quite different figures offer us perspective on submitting to God's will. The sixteenth-century Spanish nun Saint Teresa of Ávila described the goal of a Christian this way: "We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can – namely, surrender our will and fulfill God's will in us."⁶ And a former player for the New York Yankees in the '50s and '60s named Bobby Richardson captured the essence of submission in "a prayer that is a classic in brevity and poignancy: 'Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.'"⁷

Mary's closing words in the scripture of the Annunciation are her prayer of submission to God's will. Our Advent journey invites us to recognize "that the glory of Christmas came about by the willingness of ordinary people to obey God's claim on their lives."⁸ May Mary's prayer of submission, her prayer of obedience, her prayer of faith become our prayer as well: "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said."

[sermons; se20211212; © 2021 JMF]

⁵ Sermon illustration » Quarterback Roger Staubach Didn't Call His Own Plays (family-times.net) (original source unknown) accessed 12/4/2021

⁶ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (Random House, 2019), 86-87. Homiletics.com/illustrations, accessed 12/2/2021

⁷ Delivered at a meeting of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, as cited in *Biblical Recorder* at Sermon illustration » Bobby Richardson Gives a Prayer at The FCA (family-times.net) accessed 12/4/2021

⁸ *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX—Luke-John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 53