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There's Something About Mary
A sermon on Luke 1:26-38
December 16, 2018

This is week 3 of our Christmas People sermon series. We're looking at some of the different characters in the Christmas story, and discovering that their stories are also our stories. We started off two Sundays ago with "Zach and Liz Have a Baby," the story of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of two childless older people who become the parents of John the Baptist, and remembered that whoever we are, whatever our stage of life, it is never too late for the Holy Spirit to do something new. Last week, Pat gave us a glimpse of the tremendous character and faith of Joseph. And today's sermon title is "There's Something About Mary."

When I was a little girl, my family lived in a little house on 72nd Street in Overland Park, just a block or two down from Queen of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church. Because of that, we had lots of Catholic neighbors, including the family across the street, which had seven children. The sixth of these seven children was my age, and she turned out to be my good friend Jennifer. Jennifer was my introduction to Catholicism, and it was clear to me from a very young age that there are some real differences between the way Catholics and Protestants do things. I grew up in a charismatic Southern Baptist Church where we sang praise songs accompanied by guitars, drums, and piano. No liturgy, no Lord's Prayer. The pastors wore khaki pants. At Jennifer's church, people sang some things in Latin, and kept kneeling down and getting back up—it was like stepping into a foreign country. I couldn't have communion at Jennifer's church because I wasn't Catholic, and she couldn't in good conscience have it at mine, because she was.

One of the biggest differences to my five-or-six-year-old eyes, was the way Catholics viewed Mary. Jennifer had this necklace on her dresser made of sparkly beads with a silver cross

in the middle, and I did not understand why we couldn't put it on. Turns out it was a rosary, a strand of beads that people use to help them say their Hail Mary's in the proper order. I learned that Catholics commonly pray to Mary, which we just don't do in Protestant churches. Images of Mary were all over Jennifer's church, and nowhere to be found in mine. Not that Mary doesn't matter—we marvel at her story, and we love to sing “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming” and “Mary Did You Know.”

Jennifer and I remained friends, even though my family moved to the Missouri side when I started 4th grade. We ended up getting apartments down the hall from each other when we were both students at the conservatory of music at UMKC. She remained a faithful Catholic and I was firmly Protestant. I look back and think how cool it was the way we really did respect each other's differences when it came to our faith. But we did ask each other questions from time to time. I asked, “What is the big deal about Mary, anyway?” Jennifer explained that Mary was so important because she was the ultimate example of someone who said “Yes” to God.

At first, I thought, what does that even mean? I didn't hear the angel Gabriel asking Mary any questions. He just showed up and told her how things would be. Her response at the end of their conversation is: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Scholar Bruce Malina says another way to translate this is, “As you like,” or, to use that wonderful phrase from the movie Princess Bride, “As you wish!” And only AFTER Mary says this does the angel Gabriel leave, implying that she did have a choice.

The more I think about it, the more I see what an amazing response “As you wish” really is.

On Thursday, I got an interesting text message from my husband. He had promised to go get us a Christmas tree that day, but forgot he didn't have his truck with him. He humbly

acknowledged this in his message, but also wanted to know if his beautiful wife might be willing to bring home pizza and Coke in honor of the big Chiefs and Chargers game that night. Well, beautiful wife is actually a SHREWD wife. I thought for a second, and then replied that I'd be happy to bring home pizza and soda. And by the way, would he please take the clothes out of the dryer and set a mousetrap in the laundry room and take out the trash and get the mail?

In other words, I said yes, but along with my "yes" was the expectation of getting some things in return.

I wonder how often our "Yes" to God comes with conditions. Like, "Yes, God, I will serve you, but I'd like to be the person in charge of whatever projects you have in mind for me—none of that assistant stuff." "Yes, God, I will forgive her, as long as she apologizes first." Or, "Yes, God, I will go wherever you want, as long as I don't have to move my kids out of their schools." Or, "Yes, God, I will help those in need, as much as I possibly can, as long as I can still keep my vacation home and get my nails done—and by helping, dear God, I assume you have something in mind that doesn't involve actually coming into contact with anyone who might make me feel uncomfortable."

Mary's yes was just yes. No conditions, no expectations, no negotiations. As YOU wish, God, not how I wish. Whatever comes with this package, I am in.

Mary must have known just about the greatest joy any human being could know. The biggest moments of joy and contentment in my life have been the moments when my baby daughters slept peacefully in my arms. If I could live any moments over again, that would be it. I can't even imagine what Mary must have felt.

But she also knew great suffering. Watching her son being rejected in their hometown of Nazareth, being beaten, or having nails pounded into his hands and suffocating, naked and

vulnerable, on a cross. . . did she know this was part of the package when she said yes? Would it have made a difference?

It seems like we can't have great joy without also running into great suffering at some point. When we put conditions on our yeses, trying to make life comfortable and safe, we also limit what God can give us. It's like saying, "Yes, God, I see that you want to hand me this huge gift in a mysteriously shaped box with a big sparkly bow . . . but I'll just take that little gift card over there, if you don't mind, God."

Mary's unconditional yes came with pain, but it also brought joy to the world. . .

There's something about Mary. When I was in Israel earlier this fall, I got to visit Nazareth. We went to the Church of the Anunciation, run by the Franciscans, which is built over the place where it is believed that Mary lived. We waited in a long line of reverent Catholic and Orthodox Christians to walk down the steps and get a glimpse of the cave-like home where Gabriel may have appeared to young Mary. Upstairs, the main level of the sanctuary was lined with larger-than-life mosaics of Mary which were created and donated by countries around the world.

If you were at the presentation I gave last month, you've heard this story before, but I will tell you that we saw a LOT of churches on this trip. Pretty much every holy site has a church built over it, to the point where I would think, Oh, no, not another church. Then I'd go in and see something that made me glad I did, and at the Church of the Annunciation it was those mosaics of Mary. There was a mosaic from Japan, with a Japanese Mary holding a Japanese Jesus. There was a colorful mosaic from Mexico, a brown one from Canada, which was a huge disappointment to my Canadian mom, mosaics from Ukraine, Poland, Singapore, you name it, all featuring different representations of Mary. Then I caught a glimpse of a giant Mary made out of

steel. One of the pictures I took of steel Mary is on the cover of today's bulletin. Wow. She mesmerized me. On the one hand she looked so strong, almost like a warrior or a superhero, the way she gleamed in the light. On the other hand, there she was, arms down and hands open--not crossed, like I often have mine, in a defensive posture--but receptive and welcoming. Yes, Lord. As you wish, Lord.

Which country donated that? Turns out it was the United States. The artist used Pennsylvania steel to make a Mary who is both supremely strong and supremely vulnerable.

As we continue our journey to the manger, looking at the characters of Christmas and where we find our stories in theirs, I invite you to ask: What does God want to give you? What blessing or challenge is God asking you to receive today? I'll give you a hint: God is NOT asking you to be the mother or father of the messiah. But God wants to live and grow in each of us, too. God wants to change the world through us, too. How might God want to do that through you, and through me, today? It's a big question, and you'll probably have to pull a Mary and ponder these things in your heart for a while. And whatever it is, I pray we will open our hands, open our hearts, open our lives, and say a wholehearted, no-strings-attached, YES.