

2 Samuel 7:1-11. 16
Psalm 89:1-4;19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Advent 4B
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Becoming Holy Ground

Have you ever felt as if you were standing on holy ground? There are places I have been in the world, where things are different. Some people call them “thin places.” They are places where the holy is palpable and where we cannot help but get out of our heads and into our hearts. One such place for me is in the heart of the Santa Ynez mountains in Santa Barbara where the Mt Calvary Monastery stood until it burned to the ground years ago. Mt Calvary was a true spiritual home for me and I spent many long, thoughtful days studying, praying, making retreat, and receiving spiritual guidance from the monks who lived there.

One of those monks, Brother Roy, spent his days praying and offering hospitality to the guests, just as all the other monks did. But Brother Roy’s special gift was artistry. He made the most beautiful calligraphy imaginable. His little painting studio sat on the edge of a hilltop, looking over the mountains and on out to the sea, and from there some of the most beautiful passages in scripture were painted in gold leaf and ground lapis and all manner of other exquisite gems. The Holy Scriptures were made even more beautiful in Brother Roy’s care. I have several pieces of his, but the one I love most is a very beautiful and small piece in pale blues and sparkling gold that sits on the little desk in my office at home. They are the words of Mary’s “yes” to God.

The first time I read these words in the context of a service was in a little chapel, many years ago in Advent. I’d been a priest for just over a month, and I could hardly get the words out through my tears. There is nothing in the Bible that moves me more than this chapter of Luke’s gospel. Can you imagine? I mean really. Can you imagine? The angel alone is more than we can take in, so how could Mary, how could you, how could I possibly take in the stunning reality that the Holy Spirit is about to come upon us and make us pregnant with God?

As a pastor, I have the great honor of listening to people’s stories of their experiences of God, and even of helping to point toward God when God seems illusive. I have come to know that there are as many ways of experiencing God as there are people of God. I hear words like “I haven’t had one job that the Lord hasn’t led me to.” And “Why is God doing this to me?” And “God is so gracious, I can’t believe my blessings.” And “It’s too hard. I can’t do this, it’s too hard. Why won’t God help me?”

God comes to each of us in different ways, because each of us is unique, because each of us is in a different place in our lives and because we all understand things a little differently. And while God graciously comes to us in all kinds of ways, sometimes God’s ways are really not at all understandable!

I'm pretty sure Mary didn't "understand." Not in her head anyway. I'm pretty sure Mary didn't wake up that morning thinking – "Oh, I'm actually going to become Holy Ground today." But as it turns out, in the moment of her "yes"... Let it be unto me according to your word... she did just that - Mary became Holy Ground – the very house of God. And it was her heart, not her head, that said yes... Her head might have come up with lots of reasons about why this venture probably wouldn't go well, her head might have needed a lot of details about just how it was going to go over with her fiancé Joseph, her head might have wanted to know how it was all going to come out in the end. But Mary didn't respond from her head. She responded from her heart. And what poured out of her when she did was - to my ears - the most beautiful "yes" ever spoken...

Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me, according to your word.

Mary didn't say "I think this is amazing." And she didn't say "I don't think so!" *I am the servant of the Lord*, she said. Now I know myself as God's very own, chosen and favored by God. It's something we could say too. You see, we too have been chosen, we too are the favored ones.

We don't have to understand this, we just need to experience it, and the only way to experience it is to say "Yes" to God. Because when we say "Yes," God meets us just exactly where we are – not where we wish we were or think we ought to be - but God meets us right where we are and begins to do the amazing and incredible things that can only be done with the unique and particular incarnation that is each one of us.

Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word... these words were just the beginning of Mary's "Yes" to God. So how will we say "yes?"

We don't need to be Mary, the one so often pictured seated in a chair reading scripture and presenting the perfect holy moment for God to come calling - my guess is that most of us don't spend our days in that particular pose. We only need to recognize the reality that we ourselves are the holy ground in which God moves in the world. There is something very important about being attuned to God's presence in our daily lives, about expecting and anticipating God's action through us. There are wrongs that God can right in the world, only through the particular incarnation that is you. There are gifts God can give a starving and broken world, only through the uniqueness of you. There is mercy God can show to the broken and brokenhearted, only through you. And those things can happen only when we recognize ourselves for who we really are, only when we know ourselves to be God's own Holy Ground, only when we make a way to listen, and only if we too say "Yes."

What is God asking you to say "Yes" to? And how will you say "Yes" to God? This doesn't have to be the complete and total "Yes", doesn't have to be the perfect "Yes", the "Yes" you'll think of when you lie down to go to sleep tonight. It needs to be a real right here, right now "Yes." A "Yes" to God that speaks of precisely who you are and where you are. Where can you and God begin together? What does your heart desire to say "Yes" to?

Is it telling yourself the truth? Repairing a broken relationship? Is it a commitment to service, to finding a way to make the world a better place by using your unique God given gifts? Is it change of attitude? A change of mind? A change of heart? Find the place where you can say "Yes" so that you too will know the joy of your very own soul glorifying the Lord who has done such great things for you. Your "Yes" is your gift, your offering to the God who wants you to know the unspeakable joy of "Yes." Amen.