

Micah 5:2-5
Canticle 15
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

Advent 4C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Say Yes

Have you ever known yourself to be 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 was in the heart of the Santa Ynez mountains in Santa Barbara where the Mt Calvary Monastery stood until it burned to the ground several years ago. Mt Calvary was a true spiritual home for me, a place I spent many long, luxurious 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 spiritual direction and 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, one that hangs on my office door. But the one I love most is a small piece in pale blues and sparkling gold that sits on the little desk in my office at home. It is a portion of the gospel passage we just heard, Mary’s glorious song, the Magnificat.

The first time I proclaimed this gospel in church was in the small chapel at St Thomas when I was a brand-new priest. As I began – The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke, I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I could hardly speak Mary’s words through my tears. There is nothing in the Bible that moves me more than Mary’s Song to the God who called her to a dangerous, extraordinary and incomprehensible new life. What an extraordinary response! *My soul magnifies the Lord...*

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.” God comes to each of us in different ways, because each one 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 comes to us in ways that are especially for us, sometimes God’s ways are not all that understandable! I’m pretty sure Mary didn’t “understand.” Not here, 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*

to me according to your word... she did just that - Mary became Holy Ground – the very house of God.

It was her heart that responded when Elizabeth's baby recognized the presence of the Holy and leapt for joy, not her head. Her head might have come up with lots of reasons about why this venture probably wouldn't work out, 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...

My soul magnifies the Lord. And my Spirit rejoices in God my savior. Mary didn't say "I think this is amazing." She didn't say "I don't think so!" My soul. My spirit. "Now I know myself as God's very own, chosen and favored." This is all true for us too. 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. 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 right where we are, and God begins to do the amazing and incredible things that can only be done with the unique and particular incarnation that is you.

The song that glorifies God, the song of Mary's "Yes", surely sings God's praises, but there is more. Listen...

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

According to Mary's words, it's all already happened. God's kingdom has already come. God called her, just as God calls each one of us. God chose her, just as God chooses each one of us. And because Mary said "Yes" to God, she could begin to sing of the world as God sees it, a world where goodness and mercy and justice and peace and an always faithful God are the things that are true. Mary didn't sing of what God would do through Jesus in his earthly ministry. She sang of the things that God had already done, and the things that God would do through her, an ordinary teen-aged girl from Nazareth.

Mary's song is a song we can sing too! Through us, God can make justice out of injustice. Through us, God can fill the hungry with great things. Through us God can show mercy. Through

us, God can keep covenant with all people throughout all times. In our time, we are the way God works in the world. We don't need to be Mary who is 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. And still, there is something very important about recognizing the reality that we ourselves are the holy ground through 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 you. There is mercy God can show to the broken and brokenhearted, only through you. It's what happens when we recognize ourselves for who we really are, when we know ourselves to be God's own Holy Ground, when we make a way to listen, and say "Yes."

There are cards in your pews – one of Fra Angelico's beautiful renderings of the Annunciation. And if you flip those cards over, you'll find a space write your own "yes" to God. It's the writing is upside down, to remind you of God's upside-down world, where the first are last, the last are first, a world where there is justice, peace and mercy, a world where love is the law. In a moment, Sheila will play a little music while you consider your "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 just 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 is your heart's desire, what will you say "Yes" to? Is it a commitment to service? To finding a ministry that uses your unique God given gifts? Is it change of attitude, a change of mind or heart? Find the place where you can say "Yes" so that you too will know the joy of your very own soul magnifying the Lord who has done such great things for you. Your "Yes" is your gift, your offering to God. You can keep it, or you can drop your card in the offering plate and offer your gift to the God who wants you to know the unspeakable joy of "Yes." Amen.