

“Don’t Test Me” (20Dec2020)  
Luke1:26-38

We make this a story about Mary, but should actually hear it’s a story about God. Kathy Henning observed that this week. She points me—and therefore maybe you—in the right direction.

That this is telling us something about God came in a conversation pondering what was special about Mary. One answer was that she said Yes, and we’ll come back to her consent. Of course, others presuppose it was her purity, maybe even from before her birth.

But that’s not it. It wasn’t that Mary tried so hard or was so good or looked pretty or was whip smart or came from a good lineage; in spite of whatever hearing of King David may seem to imply, it’s more to subvert the legacy than to reinstate his dynasty.

We should recognize Mary as ordinary, from a tiny village, part of a common family. Given marriage customs, she was likely a fairly young girl, an adolescent by our standards.

Certainly Mary didn’t expect she was special, for God’s messenger to arrive in a stretch limo with a corsage to ask her out to prom. Mary’s just Mary. It’s clear she didn’t expect it. She wasn’t considering herself deserving, thinking, “Well, it’s about time God showed up!”

Instead, she’s surprised. I suppose we’re likely to be surprised when God shows up. And when the greeting is, “Rejoice, O highly favored, for God is with you!”—well, I’d be confused as to what that was all about!

Mary didn’t *earn* favor and sure didn’t feel that way about herself. It’s that God called her right, called her favored and honored her by the promotion. God wanted to be with her. That choice from God is what would cause her to rejoice.

And you. God favors you. God *wants* to be with you. Because God likes you. God loves you. God chooses...you! That’s probably surprising, unexpected. Maybe confusing.

And it’s also good news. So rejoice!

While you start to wonder what that could mean, let’s go back to Mary’s yes and consent. One of our Confirmation students, I hear, raised the question whether this relationship resulting in a

baby was consensual. I appreciate that concern and wary attitude.

On one hand, we might say it was consensual. Mary said yes, said Let it be. Poet Denise Levertov phrased it like this:

*we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage. The engendering Spirit did not enter without consent. God waited. She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.*

It can be noted that this was an enormous ask and an enormous Yes for Mary. The shame certainly to come. The strain of childbirth—even now, but especially without proper medical care. And how she was supposed to be part of a poor, subsistence life with a big belly and swollen feet and all. Dangerous; so yes, it took courage. Saying Yes to pregnancy seems—if I have any voice to say so—a hard thing.

But on the other hand, let’s question the consensual part. Not that Mary was faithful and responded in readiness to deal with it. But whether consent matters (besides when the Spirit is changing us and God’s favor is creating new possibility in you).

This comes back to you.

It may well seem like Mary is special because she bears the son of God. Pretty clearly Gabriel has not arrived with any such mission for you. But let’s hear more from that poem by Denise Levertov. She asked:

*Aren’t there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?*

(I want to agree: there are annunciations. God comes to you, calls you favored, blesses you to face daunting tasks. Back to the poem:)

*Aren’t there annunciations... in most lives? Some unwillingly undertake great destinies, enact them in sullen pride, uncomprehending. More often*

*those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a [person],  
are turned away from  
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.*

*Ordinary lives continue.*

Again, she deals with the question of consent. Mary had courage to say yes, but mostly the rest of us wind up saying no and miss out, she claims.

But I wonder: is this about God asking before? If God shows up primarily to offer blessing, favor, to assure you that God loves you and is with you, then that declaration seems more important than the question of whether you want to go through with it. Our willing agreement—much less our eagerness or preference or stamp of approval—seems not to matter much.

It would sure be nice if there were a lot more opting in in life. For the most apparent example, imagine if Gabriel would've come to ask whether you wanted to live through this 2020. Would you have jumped at the chance? Or gritted your teeth and then tried hard to make it turn out okay? Or declined, either politely or with a terse response to God: "Don't test me, buster."

A pop assurance declares God won't give you more than you can handle. Maybe God knew that about Mary. I'm not sure about me or maybe you. I think it comes from a verse in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians: "God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure" (10:13). It still seems dubious to me.

A lot is beyond my strength, beyond what we're ready to handle. I have plenty to be grateful for this year, but it is taxing my abilities. Others are faring much worse. We're frequently at or beyond our limits, including of endurance.

There is still a grace word in that verse, about God providing. I believe that's the important thing about God, about this story being of God favoring and choosing a common girl. It's a model for God choosing poor, insufficient you and promising to be with you, to provide for you, striving to help you endure. You sang: "Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me." And still more, that "engendering Spirit" finds new

beginnings when all human potential is lost and choice at dead ends.

It's not that you say yes to God. It's that God says yes to you.

The most perplexing verse of this story is also the biggest: "nothing is impossible for God." So why? Why this? If God could do anything, why choose Mary? Why come to be born as a poor outcast who would go on to be scorned and executed? Why would God bother with you? If God is going to cast the mighty down from their thrones and feed the hungry poor, why choose this way, with you? Why in all of this not just snap God's fingers (if God has fingers) and make it all right?

We don't know. We don't get to know. It's somehow what God chooses. And, for whatever reason, God chooses you. It doesn't promise to be easy. It doesn't mean you'll get your way. But you have the assurance that matters: God is with you. So rejoice, highly favored one.

(Hymn: "Canticle of the Turning," ELW 723)