

“Whatever!”

Introduction: As the figure of Mary comes into view each Christmas season, I am drawn to the lyrics of a song by Buddy Green. It’s called “Mary Did You Know?” and goes like this:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you’ve delivered will soon deliver you?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little baby, you’ve kissed the face of God?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven’s perfect lamb?
This sleeping child you’re holding I the Great I Am? Oh, Mary did you know...?

These are intriguing questions for us as we contemplate the mother of our Lord, and wonder what was going through her mind and heart as she heard the news the angel Gabriel had for her. They are questions we really have no way of fully answering. But they’re preceded, I think, by a larger question which I think we can at least begin to answer. When Mary responded with “whatever,” to the angel Gabriel, not in the resigned sense in which we tend to use the word, but in the sense of “yes, I am willing to do whatever you are asking,” how did she say that? What moved Mary, a young teenager from a backwater town, to be so able to make herself available to the purposes of God?

How do we make ourselves, as individuals and as a church, so available? Mary, I want to suggest, can be for us a model of discipleship, of following the call of God on our lives.

I. The Message of Gabriel

A. We meet her as the angel Gabriel returns to the action. Gabriel, you may remember, was the angel who appeared to Zechariah the priest as he was serving at the temple, to inform him that he and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, despite their old age and her, up to that point, barren condition. Not only that, but this son John would be the one who was to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Elizabeth conceived and in the sixth month of her pregnancy, Gabriel was at it again, coming on this trip to a town in Galilee named Nazareth, with even more incredible news for a young woman named Mary. She, too, was to deliver a son, but her son was going to be a king in the line of the great David, and he would rule over the entire world, forever and ever. Even more amazing, perhaps, though perfectly in line with the uniqueness of his person – this little baby would be conceived without the aid of a human father, and so would be the Son of the Most High God. Well, if that wouldn’t get your attention in the middle of the night!

B. Before we consider her response, a little more about Mary at this stage in her life. To begin with, Nazareth, her hometown, did not have the greatest of reputations. It was viewed as a place of uncultured, rude, and even irreverent people, the “armpit” of Palestine one source puts it. “Can anything good come from there?” a disciple of Jesus would later ask him (Jn. 1:46). Not only was it

the place where Mary lived, it would be the place where Jesus was raised. You might think that the King of kings would have been raised in a place like Athens or Rome, like Wenham or Wellesley, instead of Lynn or Lawrence. But right from the start we see that when God came to dwell among us, he did so in humility, at the bottom of the social ladder where injustice and unfairness and hardship was the norm. God is telling us that he not only understands the challenges of life that we face but that he's faced them also. As the television ad puts it, "He gets us."

C. Also important to understand is that her pledge to be married to Joseph was a two-stage process in her culture. The first stage, called a betrothal, was a formal, witnessed agreement to marry. In the first century, a woman was eligible for such a betrothal at the age of twelve, which is why we tend to think she was just a young teenager at this time. At this first stage, the woman could legally be called a man's wife; it took divorce proceedings to dissolve the engagement. A year later, in stage two, the husband would take his wife into his own home and physically consummate the marriage.

D. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her, Mary was in stage one, which led to the nub of her question. She did not ask how her son would be God's son, or how he would rule forever. Her question was one of mechanics: "How will this be since, well, Joseph and I are still in stage one?!" To which the angel answered by alluding to the overshadowing, life-giving power of God the Spirit, that nothing was impossible with God, and if Mary had any questions about that she could ask her relative Elizabeth about her experience! To which Mary responded: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Whatever God wants. How was Mary able to say that? Two thoughts.

II. The Response of Mary

A. First, Mary was able to say yes to God because she was willing to take God at his word, trusting in his faithful, promise keeping nature. It is actually Elizabeth who identifies this. When the two women meet and discover together the uniqueness of the calling Mary has received, and that she is going forward with it all, Elizabeth exclaims: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Well, we still might ask, how did she do that?! I think this is alluded to in the song she goes on to sing, which has come to be known as the Magnificat. It is a song highlighted by Mary's celebration of the character of God, gleaned, I would suggest, through much pondering, which Mary loved to do! Through her pondering, she came to know God as faithful, merciful, promise keeping, and powerful, linking what was going on in her all the way back to God's promises to Abraham.

We'll begin our Christmas Eve worship with that song, and you might want to spend a few minutes reflecting on it between now and then (1:46-55). What it brings to mind is what is said to be alert for when interviewing a candidate for a job: past performance is the best indicator of future success. Mary rested in the past, promise keeping performance, of the God who was calling her.

Importantly, we see the same trait in Joseph, who, when he woke up from his dream in which the angel explained all that was happening to him, even though I'm sure many questions still lingered, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took God at his word and took Mary home as his wife (Ma. 1:24).

Responding to God as Mary and Joseph did begins with hearing and trusting in his word.

B. A second factor in Mary's ability to say "yes" to God was her willingness to sacrifice her interests for his. Mary's life was not easy. Think about it. Once Jesus was born, being the mother of

Jesus would mean fleeing to far-off Egypt to outrun King Herod's evil schemes. It would mean raising a child that many would never understand. It would mean watching him be unjustly arrested and die a criminal's death. But even before all of that, it would mean enduring the scorn and disgrace of her neighbors who would assume she had gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Which in turn would mean finding no place to give birth when they arrived in Bethlehem. It was Joseph's hometown, but no relative of his was willing to receive them in their home. Nor had anyone "left a light on" for them in the local Motel 6! They were forced to find shelter with the animals. But both Mary and Joseph were willing to sacrifice their interests for the larger interest that God had begun to accomplish through them.

Saying yes to God often means doing things – living in a certain way, using our resources differently, pursuing different goals – than much of the world around us. But if we are to follow the path that leads to life, acting within the will of God will be far more rewarding, Mary would have us consider, than anything else we could have done, no matter what the sacrifice.

Conclusion:

Mary, it's important to observe, was not chosen by God to bear his Son because she was more righteous than any other woman on earth. God chose her simply based upon his grace, his undeserved favor, and she was blessed as she responded to his grace by saying "yes."

She could have, we should note, chosen otherwise. She could've told the angel she wanted nothing to do with being highly favored by God, if this is what such was going to entail! She could've threatened to terminate her pregnancy, if it happened as the angel said it would. She could've chosen what might have seemed a much easier path for her life. But she didn't. Instead, she said with amazing trust and humility, "whatever." "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." May we be willing to say and do the same.