

Enthusiastic Collaborators

Luke 1:26-38

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 1

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (NRSV)

I

What do you think a holy person looks like? When you get to know someone, what clues suggest to you that this person may be holy? Do you know holiness when you see it?

Consider Tom. Almost every Sunday, Tom came to church all alone and sat in the same chair. He was a quiet man, friendly enough, but not one of those people who goes around and shakes everyone's hand with a big smile on their face. When he walked into the church building, Tom said hi to a few people and headed for his chair in the sanctuary, where he sat and waited patiently for the service to begin. He sang the songs, closed his eyes during the prayers, dropped something in the offering plate, and listened thoughtfully to the pastor's sermons. At the break, he poured himself a mug of coffee and chatted with one or two people, then headed off to one of the classrooms for Sunday school. In his class of fellow adults, he rarely talked, preferring to listen more than to speak.

Tom sounds like an ordinary church member, don't you think? You probably know many people like him who look for all the world like conventional Christians. Nothing

about them is flashy or dramatic. In Tom's case, you wouldn't think there was anything particularly holy about him. You'd think he was a nondescript, hum-drum Christian.

That's what I thought too, but I was wrong. One weekend in the fall, our church went on a retreat at a local campground. For the Sunday morning worship service, the planners asked Tom to talk about how his faith intersected with his daily life. Tom could have talked about a dozen different things, but the story he chose to tell was the story of his wife, or specifically, the story of their marriage. After they had been married for several decades, Tom's wife was diagnosed with a disease that gradually caused her body to deteriorate. Tom cared for her in their home as long as he could, but the day came when the requirements of her care exceeded his capacity. So together, Tom and his wife agreed that she would have to move into the local nursing home. Neither of them wanted this, but they knew it had to be done. So she was moved into the nursing home, while Tom continued to live in their house.

It was at this point in the story that Tom started to weep. He told us how some of his friends suggested that it would be ok for him to divorce his wife. Cut her loose, they said, this is not the kind of marriage you signed up for. Divorce her and find yourself a new wife who's physically able, someone who can do things with you, someone with whom you can create a new life.

With the tears bouncing down onto his lap, Tom told us he could never do such a thing. He had made a covenant in the presence of God to love and cherish, for better or for worse, and he was not going to break that covenant. He and his wife were still committed to each other. He went to see her in the nursing home every day after work. No, they couldn't have sex anymore. No, they couldn't go on trips together anymore. But they could still talk and hold hands. They could still be best friends. They could still stay married.

While listening to Tom, I realized that among us was a holy man.

What, for you, are the signs of holiness?

Who, for you, is a holy person?

II

The story of Mary offers us some insights into holiness. People have traditionally said that in this story Mary is a meek and mild woman, who quickly submits to Gabriel's astonishing proposal. This conventional interpretation of Mary has left some women with the impression that they too should be meek and mild, obeying whatever God or the men in their life want them to do.

It is true that Mary displays humility toward God. In verse 38 of the NRSV, she replies to Gabriel with the words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Yet within Mary's humble response lies an earth-shattering act. Mary is not just accepting God's request. Instead, she actively prays for it. She wishes for it. She hopes for it. With all her heart, she wants to bear this child and prays that it may come to pass.

We know this because of the grammatical construction of the Greek sentence in verse 38. I myself do not know the subtleties of Greek grammar, so I'm relying here on people who do know Greek. It has to do with something called the aorist optative mood. This aorist optative mood indicates that Mary is wishing or praying for this to happen. A rough translation into English is "would that it be so" or "be it so." Verse 38 would then read something like, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; would that it be with me according to your word." In other words, please make this happen, God! I want to become pregnant with this child! Bring it on!¹

This interpretation means that Mary is not submissively accepting whatever God wants. Instead, it means that Mary is a woman of enthusiastic prayer. She's caught a vision for what God wants to do in the world and is excitedly asking God to go ahead and do it, to make it happen, to put it in motion here and now. God offers her a chance to participate in the divine mission, and Mary jumps at the opportunity. Without hesitating, she becomes an enthusiastic collaborator with God.

¹ Sarah Klitenic Wear, "Wishing for God's Plan: Mary's Fiat in Luke 1:38," *First Things*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/12/wishing-for-gods-plan-marys-fiat-in-luke-138>, accessed November 9, 2017.

III

Holiness can be expressed in many ways. In a woman like Harriet Tubman, holiness was expressed in the courageous ways she resisted slavery. In a man like Cesar Chavez, holiness was expressed in his tireless advocacy for migrant farm workers. In Mother Teresa, holiness was expressed in her unending care for poor persons dying on the streets. None of these people were perfect, but then holiness is not really a measure of moral perfection. Even holy people can still sin and fall short of the glory of God.

However, there is one quality which you can probably see in all holy people. Somewhere along the line, they have given God a courageous “yes!” They sensed from God some kind of invitation, some kind of summons, some kind of holy call, and gave their willing, perhaps even enthusiastic, consent. Consent is the foundation of holiness. It is through our consent that we become collaborators with God, and through our collaboration with God that we become holy. In this sense, holiness comes to us as a byproduct of participating in God’s mission. Holiness is not so much the goal; instead, the goal is cooperating with God. In our day-to-day efforts to work with God, holiness is given to us. It comes as we live in fidelity to our spouse and our friends. It happens as we try to raise our children well. It shows up as we do our work with honesty and integrity. Our enthusiastic consent to God forms the foundation of whatever holiness we are given.

IV

I see holiness in this congregation. Perhaps you do too. You can catch glimpses of it as people say yes to God, and then keep saying yes even when the going gets tough. You might see it in household living, in schools or offices, or in community projects. If you listen carefully, you might hear whispers of it in prayers or conversations. Holiness happens as we keep collaborating with God hopefully, faithfully, and enthusiastically.