

## ***Tell God I Say Yes***

Luke 1:26-55

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

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Advent 4

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He 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. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>The 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. <sup>36</sup>And 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. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>Then 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.

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Billy was a kid in the neighborhood who had a rough edge, a **rowdy** kid who **pushed other people's buttons**. He hung out with my younger brothers and was in and out of our home.

One day when Billy was 10 years old, my Mom got a call from Billy's mom, a single parent with an only child, and what she said was startling,

***"Mrs. Richer, I know you don't know me very well, and this may seem like an outrageous request, but I have cancer and if I die, I need a good home for Billy. Will you take Billy into your family in the event of my death?"***

Woe! My mom hardly knew this woman.

Billy's mom worked full time and had no church and seemingly no good support system, so she just looked around and saw that our family might be a potentially good landing place for her son.

Well MOM **needed time** with this one.

She needed to talk to my dad and pray.

This was a time of **anguish**, and my dad, who had confidence in her wisdom, let the decision rest on MOM... And finally Mom admitted that she did **not have the capacity to love** Billy like he would need...

But then she heard GOD say, ***"You don't, Velma, but I have the capacity to love Billy through you."*** She trusted that word, and said **YES**, and prayed fervently for Billy's Mom to survive!

Billy's mom did survive and none of us kids knew this story of Mom's difficult **YES** until we were young adults.

Francis of Assisi was a young man in his 20's,  
kneeling before the foot of a large cross that hung in a  
little, abandoned field chapel that was half in ruins.  
He was longing to know God's will for his life  
seeking to be a **colleague, partner, and conduit**  
of the WAY of Jesus. And as he knelt before this cross,  
he heard a summons...

**"FRANCIS, RESTORE MY CHURCH" ...**

So Francis **did what he knew to do** and spent the next  
months and years restoring that broken-down,  
abandoned chapel, building a structure so secure, it  
still stands over 800 years later.

BUT the CALL to **RESTORE the CHURCH** of JESUS was  
**much larger** than the bricks and mortar of building  
repair... and as Francis kept living into this call,  
it expanded ..

**One YES led to another**

and he kept following the summons to  
RESTORE the Church of JESUS

to **justice** for the poor,

to a way of **simplicity** and letting go,

to the way of **peace** and nonviolence

and to **healing** for the little and the least.

**Birthing the Christ** required doing what he knew to do  
& **little-by-little** leaning into a new

**YES after Yes after Yes.**

I always come back to Martin'S cup of coffee at midnight, when his children AND FAMILY WERE RECEIVING **bomb threats**, and he was **weary** and ready to **throw in the towel** to his involvement in the Movement.

But that night he heard:

**Stand up, Martin**  
**Stand up for righteousness.**  
**Stand up for truth**  
**Stand up for justice**  
**and I will be WITH YOU always.**

At midnight over a cup of coffee,  
Martin **crossed the bridge of fear**,  
**and said YES** again to BIRTHING the CHRIST.

Mary's **YES** to bear the Christ..

Will it be **hard**?

She did not **know HOW hard** it could get.

She could not foresee birth in an animal's cave,

**Herod's slaying** decree or years as **a homeless refugee**.

She did not know how **dangerous** her **son's radical teaching** would be... and that the throne she was

picturing when she said **Yes** was not in a palace, but on an executing cross of public humiliation.

She could **not** foresee **how hard** it would get.

All she knew was that God was asking her **at this juncture to BE AVAILBLE to birth newness**.

This was not so much about **her CAPACITY To love...**

but about God's capacity to love the world THROUGH HER.

This calling to birth the Christ is NOT just Mary's story this Christmas...IT's **all of our stories**. It is a little *YES* that will lead to another **Yes**, and it's about **crossing the bridge of fear** and becoming more **available for the upside-down coming of CHRIST**.

I entered seminary in the mid 70's with **NO CAPACITY** to *imagine* myself in a pastoral role. I had never met a woman pastor. And my own pastor shared with our congregation that ***I would be attending seminary, but not to fear, because "This has nothing to do with pastoral ministry."*** And I had no problem with his words.

But after 3 years at AMBS, a call came to the seminary from a church in Illinois, and the pastor there said, ***"We are looking for an Associate Pastor and would be open to a woman, do you have any candidates to suggest?"***

The Field Director at the time, Jake Elias, received that call and told me he **felt led to give the caller only my name**. I was not looking for this kind of a role and Jake's word to me was **frightening**.

I went running to the office of David Augsburg, who taught pastoral counseling and asked him, ***"Dave, if a church in central Illinois would call me to be a pastor, would I have to go?"***

***"NO,"*** he quickly assured me.

***"You do not have to go to Central Illinois. Which church are you talking about?"***

***A church in Normal where there is a pastor named James Waltner.***

**“Oh!”** Dave said, **“Sorry, Mag,  
if THAT Church calls you, you do have to go!”**

So I met the search committee and when they wanted to pursue my candidacy, I was **struggling**. Something inside said this **could be** a good **match** for **my gifts and my love for the church**, but I had a **boyfriend** at seminary who was ambivalent about our future together and did not have a car. And I knew he would likely NOT be traveling to Illinois IF I followed this call to pastor.

That's when my friend and worship professor, Orlando Schmidt, invited me over for a breakfast. He made a delicious bacon waffle and then said, **“Mag, I do not know if your relationship with Bob is to be, but what I do know is that a miraculous door has been opened for you In Illinois and God is waiting for you to say YES.”** IT took at least three **GABRIELS**...Jake, David, Orlando, But I did say **YES**.

And at my installation service, Orlando came, Bob came, and Grandma and Lucy were there. Grandma was close to 90 years old and she and my Aunt Lucy were **steeped in a theology of male headship** that had **little capacity to be stretched to understand how a Woman could be in a pastoral role**. But here they were with a LOVE for me that was larger than all the **“shoulds & oughts”** of all they had been taught about womens' roles. They were **wearing their prayer coverings** and **whispering blessing** into my ear, holding me in an embrace that **affirmed the calling I had received was Real**.

**Elizabeth was there in the flesh!**

And the text was the Annunciation to Mary,  
and the choir sang the **Magnificat**.

THE STORY TODAY IS **OUR** STORY. IT IS ABOUT THE  
**INBREAKING OF A CALL** to THOSE WHO DESIRE TO BE  
**COLLEAGUES PARTNERS and CONDUITS** of  
a **WAY**, a **SPIRIT**, a **God who is LOVE**.

THE STORY TODAY IS ABOUT **OUR** WILLINGNESS TO SAY  
**YES** *and then* **LITTLE-by-LITTLE** discover  
**WHAT THAT YES** entails.

It's about **all those Gabriel's** who **believe in our gifts**,  
**tap us on the shoulder** and enter in through mysterious  
light in our windows.

IT is about ***crossing the bridge of fear*** and **trusting** that  
there is justice and truth worth standing up for  
and a Spirit who will be **with us ALWAYS**.

IT is about **needing Elizabeth** in the form of loving friends  
& a community we can **lean on** for support...  
a community who will assure us (in all our doubts) that  
we **ARE on the right path**,  
and that **God is here among us and in us**. And it is  
about **Mary** who believes there will be a fulfillment of  
what has been spoken to her by the LORD, so she sings  
her **YES** to the ONE who **IS BRINGING**  
**hope, revolution, transformation...**a song of God's  
coming equity & justice  
on earth as it is in heaven...through her!  
May singing Mary's song **help us** to **embody** a new **YES!**