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14 Scott Powell Mary's Role in Our Redemption

Well, hello, everybody, and welcome to The Pray More Lenten Retreat. My name is Scott Powell, and I know it's Lent, but I want to get a little Christmas-y for a minute. So, let's open in prayer first.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Jesus we thank you for the gift of this Lent. We pray that you would walk with us as we journey through this season. That you would open our mind and our eyes, our ears and our hearts to what you have to teach us. Please be with all the retreatants, with all the organizers, and the speakers, and help us get the most out of this season. We pray all these things through Christ, our Lord, Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

All right, so again, I know it's Lent, but I want to talk about one of the stories that we tend to think about more at Christmas time, which is the story of the annunciation. And I want to reflect for a little bit on what's actually happening with Mary when she gives her famous, profound, yes. What's called her fiat. Her "I want to do your will, God". Because sometimes I think that this is a story that we've heard so many times, and we apply it to such a happy season, like Christmas, where it's fun, and there are songs, and presents, and everything else, that we forget how, kind of Lenten it actually is.

So, I want to start by reading it. It comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter one and I'm going to start in verse 26. And it says this, verse 26: *"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you."* But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and she considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her: *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God and behold you will*

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conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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 father, David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, how can this be, since I have no husband? And the angel said to her, well “the Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the most High will overshadow you. And therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman, Elizabeth, in her old age, she has conceived a son, and this is the sixth month of her who was called barren. For with God, nothing is impossible”. And Mary said, *behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to your word.* And the angel departed from her.

All right, there's a lot going on there. And again, we've heard this story. Or we've probably heard this story many times. But there's some stuff to unpack. First thing is this: The way that Luke kind of sets up this story is really interesting, and it's the opposite of what you'd expect an author like Luke to do, because Luke basically sets up his Gospel by giving you two annunciations. And the first one takes place in Jerusalem to a priest named Zachariah, who is John the Baptist's father. Who is offering the incense, which is this really important thing that Levitical Priests were able to do, because they got to be right next to the presence of God and the Holy of Holies, offering the prayer which is what incense always represents, on behalf of all of Israel. A huge deal, big capital city, high profile moment, and the angel Gabriel appears to him, and he says, hey, this thing is going to happen. All of the prayers of all of Israel are being answered. Oh, and by the way, you're going to have a son too, and he's going to be the forerunner, and prepare the way for this hugely answered prayer, and the Messiah that's coming into the world.

Then, he goes from the capital city. From the big deal, from the Temple, from the centre of everything, and he goes to a place called Nazareth, which was not that significant a city. It was kind of ‘nowheresville’. People didn't really care about Nazareth. Remember later on in the

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Gospel when people find out that Jesus was from Nazareth? They're even confused by it. They're like, what good comes out of Nazareth? That's the middle of nowhere. Nobody cares about Nazareth. And if that's not enough, He appears to this woman named Mary, who is probably a peasant woman. She probably doesn't have very much money. We know that when she finally marries Joseph, they don't have money because of the offering that they give at the Temple. It's the offering of the poor. So she is a lowly, peasant, young, girl of probably 12, 13 years old.

And the irony of the way that Luke tells you the story is that Gabriel is sent to two different places, and he gives two different announcements, annunciations. One is in the big capital city, in the centre of everything, at the Temple, to a priest. The other one is in the middle of nowhere to this, probably forgotten, not very significant, little, peasant girl. Which one is the more significant message? Well, the second one is. But, it shows you how God works.

God always sort of flips our expectations upside down. He always comes where we least expect it. Now, not to say that the announcement to Zachariah was not important; it was profoundly important. But He always flips the expectations on their head. And so when Mary is there, and the angel appears to her, we begin by getting the first lines of the hail Mary prayer, right, so the angel says, hail full of grace. -Which is actually a term that's not really a term in Greek. -That language that was being spoken when this was written.

He actually makes the 'filled with grace' a title. He calls her that. Hail, you who have been filled with grace. And grammatically, scholars have been fascinated by this term, because it means, hail, you who have been totally and completely filled with grace. Not, hail, favored one, or hail, oh really cool lady. It's not that. It's hail, the person who God has worked a profound act in already. Hail, you who have been filled with grace. The Lord is with you. And when the angel says those words, Mary responds with some fear and some trepidation. -Which is the same

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thing Zachariah did back in the Temple. Remember, he was afraid of what was said. He seemed to doubt, and he was struck mute for nine months.

Mary, kind of expresses some trepidation too, and she's comforted by the angel. And you're like, well wait, what's the difference? Well the difference is Zachariah seems to be questioning whether this could possibly happen. I don't know if I buy it. Mary actually responds appropriately, because what the angel says to her is, hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. And anytime in the Old Testament where the term the Lord is with you shows up, it's usually because God is going to call someone to do a seemingly impossible task.

When Moses is called to go before Pharaoh to set his people free, He says, I will be with you. When Jeremiah is called to go pronounce curse on the Temple leadership and call them hypocrites, and say that the Temple's become a den of robbers, God says, the Lord is with you. When Elijah has to go and call out the false gods of Israel and speak truth to this powerful king, we're told the Lord is with you. And so if Mary knows her scripture, which I'm sure she does, and she hears the words, the Lord is with you, the only appropriate response should be, uh-oh; this is going to be big. And this is going to be really hard. And so the angel begins explaining, though, this is what's going to happen. And she says, how it can be, because I have no husband? I'm not married. This marriage has not been completed yet. This is a problem. And the angel kind of goes on to explain the process and what's going to happen here; and then here's what I want to kind of zero in on.

So this is fascinating. It's beautiful and Mary's response is appropriate. But sometimes I think we, we reduce Mary's yes to, well, this is this really hard situation, it's going to be this teenage girl who's going to be put in this awkward situation, and people are going to talk behind their back, and it's going to be uncomfortable, but I'll say yes anyway. And that's not what Mary's yes is. I mean, yeah, there's a piece of that.

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But what Mary is saying yes to is the impossible. Because what Mary knows is that everyone around her knows that her marriage has not been consummated yet. They're betrothed, she's betrothed to Joseph, which means that they've done step one. It's not engagement exactly. It's legal marriage, 'cause remember, Joseph thinks he has to divorce her. But there's two steps to the ancient, Jewish marital process. First was the betrothal where you were actually brought together as husband and wife, you're wed. And then step two, which would happen months later, was when you actually, physically, came together, as man and woman. You consummate the marriage. And everybody knows that hasn't happened yet. And so when it turns out that Mary's going to be pregnant, it's not going to be people speaking behind her back. It's not going to be people kind of whispering in the shadows. It means one thing, and it means one thing alone. That if Mary's found to be pregnant outside of the completion and the consummation of her marriage, she will be stoned. That is the law. That is the expectation.

And to be stoned meant that she would probably be buried, half of her body underground, where half of her body would begin to freeze. The other half would bake in the sun, where she would be incapacitated, and people would come, starting with the young in the city and the town. They would throw pebbles, and slowly start throwing larger stones, and eventually boulders to try to crack her skull open, until she died. And she was left to bake in the heat of the desert sun. And I don't say that to get graphic. I'm not trying to get, you know, gruesome or gory; I'm not.

But what I want us to realize is what this young girl, who's been graced by God in a singular way, is actually saying yes to. She's not just saying yes, I'll accept the awkwardness, yes, I'll accept the uncomfortable looks, yes, and it's going to be kind of shameful for my family. She says, I see that the only way out of this is death. They're going to stone me. They are going to kill me, murder me; probably Joseph as well. And I see no other way out of that. I see no alternative to that scenario. But, yet, I understand that God is bigger than those scenarios. I understand that God is unfathomable. And so even though I can't fathom a way out of

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this, I will say yes to the impossible. And I will say, be it done unto me according to your word.

That, brothers and sisters, is why we put such an emphasis and such heroism on Mary. Because what that yes represents is looking into a world where God's will for us, God's plan, or at least what we think God's plan is, seems utterly impossible. It seems like there's no way. There's no way I can get through this. There's no way I can do that task that God has set out for me. There's no way I can carry a cross that is that big. I see no way out. But yet I know that I have a God who is trustworthy. And I know I have a God who is bigger than that.

And so, I say yes. I give my fiat. I say okay, be it done unto me according to your word. -Because Mary has a faith in God that is able to conquer the impossible. He can do what human eyes, what logic, what human ears, what nothing suggests is possible. And she says yes. It was a hard thing to do, and I think there's a reason that we don't tell these stories at Christmas time, and make them into nice, Christmas hymns that Bing Crosby sings. That's not a thing. Because I don't think our minds quite know what to do with a yes that is that heroic, and that much courage.

And later on, she's going to be told by Simeon that, you know, she's finally out of the woods, and this things happens. And she has the child, and then finally raising Jesus, and she's told by the prophet Simeon at the Temple at his presentation that, actually, He's going to be the cause of the rise and fall of many in Israel, and He's going to be the sign of contradiction, and a sword is going to pierce your heart. As if the sword hasn't pierced your heart enough, Mary? It's going to pierce even harder and even more when you see what will happen to your Son. And again, you don't get the words during the presentation, but Mary once again says, okay. Be it done unto me according to your word. I don't understand how I'm going to get through this. I don't understand what the end of this road is, but I will say yes. And because of Mary's yes, she then stands first in line of true disciples, of those who follow after Jesus.

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Even though she's his mom, she stands first in the line of those who go after him. Of those who have the audacity and the courage to believe that through God, the impossible is possible. So I don't know if many of us are facing scenarios that are as extreme as Mary was, but I think we should take heart, especially this Lent, when we reflect on life not being easy all the time. It's not always happy go lucky. It's not all Christmas hymns; and when we think about those things in our lives that just seem insurmountable, those things that just don't seem possible. I don't know how I'm going to get through this. I don't know how I'm going to reconcile that. I don't know how I'm going to get from this day to the next. This is when we need to look to Mary. And say, Mary, how did you give that? How did you give your yes? You were just a little kid for Pete's sake, and yet, you were able to have the courage of the greatest saint. I need you.

This is why Mary, in the Christian tradition, the Catholic tradition, is held in such high esteem as the intercessor. -Because she knows. She knows what it feels like to not know how you're going to get through it. She knows what it feels like to have no idea how this thing's going to pan out. And I think it's good reflection for us.-Because it's not enough to reduce Mary's yes to something of the peripheral, to the external stuff. This is a deep, I trust in a God who can do the impossible. Do we trust in a God who can do the impossible? I know I don't all the time. But I'm sure trying. And this Lent, I'm going to try to ask for Mary's help, and I invite you to do the same.

Thanks so much, everybody.