

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT (B)

Luke 1:26-38  
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*The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS*  
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church  
Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Consider: does the future of the creation hang on the answer of a single thirteen-year old girl? Suppose Mary said to the angel, “*No. Go away?*”

Of course, we don’t know for sure how old Mary was when the angel Gabriel came to her with his announcement. But it wasn’t unusual for a girl of 13 to be betrothed to an older man in first century Palestine. In any case, Mary wouldn’t have had much to say in the matter. And she didn’t have all that much say in response to what the angel announced: “*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.*” And then the angel delivered the heart of the message:

*Behold, you will 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,  
and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever;  
and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

Can you imagine all the angels gathered around, looking down, holding their collective breath? “*What will Mary say? Will she cooperate? Will she do it? C’mon, Mary, say ‘yes’!*”

The way God works, is by allowing people to freely answer “yes.” By allowing people to freely cooperate, to freely do **his** will — there’s a conundrum for you. We’re so caught up with freedom of choice in our society, and concerned about the exercise of free will. How free are we, really, to choose or to exercise freedom of the will? We’re always hemmed in by some circumstances. Our options are always limited, whether we’re talking about schools, jobs, marriage, or dealing with an unplanned pregnancy. I can’t imagine that Mary wanted to be pregnant at this point. If an angel from God comes and tells you that you’re going to bear the Lord’s Son, what choice do you have?

And yet, even though in the mystery of his own counsel God has decided what **He** will do, do we read anywhere in Scripture that God **forces** people to go along with his plan? I don’t think so. Indeed, if God **forced** people to do what is right, the world wouldn’t be in such a mess — such a mess that he had to send his Son to save it.

Ever since Adam and Eve, people have had the **freedom to disobey** God, as well as the freedom to obey. And we have all exercised this freedom. From the beginning God has allowed people to continue in their disobedience, turned them over to their own ideas of how to get their own way, to find themselves in the prison of their own designs, even to hit bottom if necessary, if only to give them a firm place from which to say, “*Okay; I give up! **Your will** be done.*”

God created us in his own image, and He acts in freedom. Does God respect our freedom? It seems so — ever since those days in the garden of Eden. If it weren't so, the Lord wouldn't have had to come up with new ways to reach out to people — to ask them again and again to say yes — to freely say “yes” — to him.

And now those ways have culminated in this moment, when an angel stands before a girl, answering her questions, and waiting — waiting for her response: Will she do it? Will she say, “Yes”?

We know the answer Mary gave: “*Behold, I am the handmaid — the servant — of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*” With that answer, all the heavens rejoice, and the plan is set in motion that will cause a new light to shine in the darkness, and provide grounds for new hope, new peace, new freedom. And Mary's answer gives words for us too — words that change everything.

During Advent, we have heard about how to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We have heard about Advent's gifts to us: a time for self-examination, a time for repentance, for turning away from situations and ways of life, which keep us from drawing close to the God who is always drawing near to us.

Today's Advent gift, is the gift of commitment — of turning toward God and making the commitment to offer ourselves as no less than the handmaidens — the servants — of God. To say — along with Mary — our own “*Yes. Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.*” These are words that change everything.

Mary wasn't the first to say these words. She stands in a long line of God's people who have been bold and faithful enough to say to the Lord's request, “Here am I.” Noah said, “*Here am I,*” when God told him to build the ark. Abraham said “*Here am I*” when God told him to get his wife, pack his things, and journey to a new land which God would show him. The boy Samuel said, “*Here am I*” when God called him. And he began a long career of speaking the truth even when it was unpopular or disturbing.

And now Mary, this young girl, probably just old enough to bear a child, ponders and asks and wonders, and then declares the words that change everything: “*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.*” And so Mary would give birth to the one who would make service, even **service unto death**, the way of life. She would give birth to the one, in the words of a classic prayer, “*in whose service is perfect freedom.*”

The name of Mary's baby was Jesus. In Hebrew, this name is *Yeshua*, which means, “God saves,” but it can also mean “God **liberates.**” God brings freedom. When we are willing to serve God and do what **he asks** of us, it is **freeing**. When we can stop asking, “What's in it for **me**? How does this help **me**? What can **I** get out of it? — then we know what **true freedom** really is.

When you are freed from all attempts to be **self**-important and **self**-serving, you are free indeed — freed for service, freed for purpose, freed for meaning.

When you offer yourself as God's servant and are open to hearing what it is the Lord asks of you, then you take our place in that long line of faithful people who have said, "Here am I." Then you find yourself set free to perform both small acts of care and compassion, and large ones. You are made available for the adventures God has in store for you, for the work God needs you to do, and the work God has designed you, uniquely, to do.

That's the beauty of it. Even though you may never have thought about what God is asking of you, that doesn't mean that God hasn't been preparing you to do it. Or that he doesn't need **you** — and **you** in particular — to do it. In the mystery of his own counsel, God may have been preparing **you** for a particular job — a particular service or vocation — since the foundation of the world.

Mary has already taken care of giving birth to the Word-made-flesh — so God isn't asking you to take that on. But don't think the angels aren't holding their breath to hear **your answer**, when God approaches you with a task to do, or a challenge to face, in your own daily life. And don't think, just because you can't hear it, that all the heavenly hosts aren't singing, "**Alleluia!**" when you freely answer "yes" to God's call.

And you don't need to find any new or fancy words. These will do:  
*"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word."*

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.