

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 24, 2023

The Perfect Christian Response

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this fourth and last Sunday of Advent. We now come to the time of Christmas. In fact, because of the way the calendar and the world works, today is also Christmas Eve. I hope to see you all tonight and if not tonight, tomorrow morning to welcome the new babe, Jesus, into his first day.

But this morning, we are privy to read the calling of Mary to give birth to Jesus. And as we know the church has often had a difficult time knowing how to regard Mary. In certain times and places, she has been exalted to a status approaching that of deity, so much so that some medieval theologians even began to speak of a Quaternity rather than a Trinity.

In sharp distinction to such excesses, Protestants have tended to ignore Mary's role in the drama of salvation history. In America today, there are lots of Protestant churches named St. Andrew's, St. Mark's, and St. Stephens, but very few named St. Mary's. Yet by any objective analysis, Mary plays a far more important role in biblical accounts than Andrew, Mark, or Stephen. Thank God for our Anglican roots, as we have several St Mary's on our list.

Still, Mary's memory is cherished in certain ways, especially at this time of year, Christmas. Many have taken her to be a model of sacred motherhood. And now as society has evolved, she has become valued more generically as a woman.

She has also at times become a role model for feminist identification: Mary the Virgin has known no man; she is her own person, unexploited; her identity is not given to her by any male, but is her own, a gift from God.

But there is another image that I think our author of today's Gospel is trying to explain to us. One that may be the most important image of all. Luke does not exalt Mary as a goddess, or as a mother, or even as a woman. He thinks she has a more important role, as the ideal Christian.

In the Third Gospel, Mary becomes *the* model for Christian discipleship, the person whom all people (men and women alike) should emulate, especially if they wish to follow her son. What is that role? The ability to say "yes" to God's calling.

This aspect of Mary is easily overlooked, perhaps because her story is only found in Luke's Gospel. In Mark, her most memorable appearance may be the account in which she and her other sons come to take Jesus home, thinking Jesus had gone mad and was possibly possessed by a demon. Mary doesn't fare too much better in Matthew although now she is present at the empty tomb. John never mentions her by name and Paul makes no mention of her at all.

But in Luke, Mary is the most Christ-like human being in the story. Her words to the angel, cited in this week's text, are a direct parallel to what Jesus later prays in the garden saying basically "Let it be with me according to your word" or "Not my will but yours be done." In both cases, the ideal response to God is presented as a combination of humble trust and obedient service.

We say these words every Sunday, "Our Father in Heaven hallowed be thine name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done." *Thy will be done*, the Christian response, the Advent beginning and ending, started from a lowly girl who would find this will of God to give both great joy and great sorrow. The true story of every Christian life. Great joy, and great sorrow. Because to love, is to experience both. It is with love that Mary responds.

Some Old Testament texts in which there is a divine annunciation of a special birth: Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis, and Samson in Judges. In each of these cases the parallels

might suggest the real focus is not on the person to whom the announcement is made, but on the child who is to be born.

And although Jesus is the “reason for the season”, today the focus is actually more on Mary than it is on Jesus. Mary is being called to a prophetic task: bearing and raising Jesus. Some scholars have even said Luke presents Mary as a prophet and Jesus as her oracle. Mary is identified here as the “favored one” and as one who has “found favor with God.” Later, in the verses that follow, she will be described as “blessed” among women.”

But God’s plan, which makes me wonder if there was a plan B, totally depended on Mary’s consent. A blank check to God, per se, to make happen whatever was to happen. Do you have that kind of faith? Have you ever said, yes, to what God puts in front of you. Have you ever said, here I am? Mary has given us the perfect Christian response.

This fourth Sunday of Advent, directly leading into Christmas eve, I ask you to contemplate what saying yes to God is for you this year. In the weeks leading up to today, have you been seeking a relationship with God, has Jesus come to you in a clearer way?

Only God knows what will come before us, and only God knows what is in our hearts. But even God waited for Mary’s response and consent. God is always willing and desiring a relationship with us, but he will not force it.

Preachers may call out to repent and turn to God, just as John the Baptist did. But just like Mary, you are the one who needs to make the first move. This story of a God previously displayed as power and decree, today becomes the loving Creator and Father waiting on the consent of his creation and daughter Mary, a woman, to give us the perfect Christian response, “here I am.” Amen