

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on December 12, 2021

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

“Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.”
Luke 1:38

One of the core stories of Jesus’ coming into the world is the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel appears in Nazareth to the young girl Mary to tell her of the coming of Jesus in the world. This begins the huge role that Mary plays in the story of salvation.

Next summer, God willing, many of us will be visiting one of my favorite Churches in the world, Sacre Coeur in Paris. This Church is built on a hill overlooking the city. It has a beautiful white dome that hovers over the Montmartre district of Paris. But it is not the exterior that draws me to this cathedral. What I really love is the painting on the dome over the high altar. At the center of the painting is a huge figure of the Risen Christ. In the center of the figure of Jesus is a heart surrounded by a crown of thorns. This “sacred heart” is what gives the name to the church.

The second largest figure in the painting is Mary. She is bigger than any of the other human figures because she was the first person to say yes to the good that God would bring us in Jesus. When the angel came to her and said that she was to be part of God’s plan for bringing Jesus into the world, she responded, **“Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.”** This response I believe makes Mary the first Christian. In saying these words Mary became what the Greeks called Theotokos, or God bearer or Mother of God.

Let me begin by reminding us of the simplicity of Mary’s life. This young peasant girl lived a rather average life. She did the very same things that other women of her day and time did. Mary never did anything out of the ordinary throughout her whole life. She never accomplished anything that would be recorded in ordinary history. She would never receive special mention in the *Jerusalem Post*. She would never have been considered for *Time*’s person of the year. She would not have pictures in *People* magazine or be profiled by *Sixty Minutes*. She would not have been followed on Twitter. There is no human reason to believe that Mary would have been remembered for more than a few years after her death.

Yet it was this very same Mary who has been remembered after most of the famous people of her day have been forgotten. Through the years countless artists have painted pictures of her. Hosts of Christians have remembered her in prayer as they have said the prayer based on a passage from Luke, “Hail Mary full of Grace, Blessed art thou among women and Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

Now I am sure that some of you felt uncomfortable hearing me recite a part of what is called the Rosary. This is because Mary has not only been remembered through history; she has also been a source of tension and controversy. Mary became a point of

controversy during the Reformation. During the first 1500 years of Christian history a cult of Mary had grown up. Henry Adams the great-grandson of John Adams wrote a wonderful book on Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. It is part history, part-guide book and part architectural history seeking to understand those two monumental structures in France. In seeking to understand Chartres, Adams tells us that in the Middle Ages the people of France fell in love with Mary. She became almost a divine figure. People prayed to her and asked favors from her. All over France there are hundreds of Churches called Notre Dame, which means our Lady, built for Mary. She at times seemed to be treated like a Goddess.

The reformers tried to purify the faith of these non-biblical practices. Yet when it comes to Mary our tradition went a little overboard. Our Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopal brothers and sisters rightly accuse us of ignoring Mary. In Mary's case we have thrown the mother, not the baby, out with the bathwater. We may allow Mary to stand in our crèche during the Christmas season, but soon after the New Year we quickly pack her away and forget about her until next Advent.

We Protestants need to be reminded that in the Bible Mary played a significant role in the story of Jesus. For it was to this simple maid that a messenger from God came and said that she was to give birth to a Son, Christ the Lord.

It was to Mary that a child was born, a child who was to grow up and die for the sins of the world. It was in Mary's womb that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." Mary's life had significance for the whole world because she said a simple "yes" to God.

Mary said, "**Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.**"

These words of faith were not spoken to a promise that she would be called the queen of heaven. No, Mary was merely told that she would become pregnant with the longed-for Messiah.

Let us be clear. This was not unambiguous good news for Mary. She was a young woman somewhere between 12 and 15 years of age. She was betrothed to a man named Joseph. There were all kinds of reasons for her to refuse the angel. She must have guessed that if her pregnancy became known that she would lose Joseph. Joseph was a kind man, but he was also righteous. He certainly would not go through with a marriage to one who would appear to be unfaithful.

She would have known the fate of other women who had been found out to be an adulteress. Many of them were rejected by their families for having brought disgrace upon their house. Many of these women ended up on the margins of society living in poverty and getting by through begging or prostitution. No, it was not an easy choice for Mary to respond **Let it be to me according to your word.**

Mary continued to trust in the promise of God through the birth of her Son. Mary

must have felt relieved that Joseph did not back out of the contract and took her as his wife. Then the Roman authorities demanded a census. Mary was forced to travel to Bethlehem with Joseph in order to register. This occurred late in her pregnancy. She made that long difficult journey in discomfort. It meant leaving her family and support system behind to travel to the city of David. Then when they arrived they could not find a decent place to stay and ended up in some place for animals. It was there, isolated from people she knew, far from her bed at home that this young girl gave birth to Jesus.

Then instead of being able to return to their home, Mary is told by Joseph that they must flee to Egypt because King Herod is out to kill the baby. Mary and Joseph then made the long journey to Egypt. They lived there for almost two years. Mary would have struggled with the new language to shop in the market. She would have had to begin raising her baby without the help and advice of her mother and friends. Mary could not have been sure how long they would live in exile.

Yet Mary continued to be faithful to God- **Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.**

During the next thirty years Mary saw her son grow and mature. They moved back to Nazareth. She saw Joseph teach Jesus his craft. Then Joseph had died. Jesus took his place and Mary became dependent on her son.

Then around the age of thirty he decided to leave home. Jesus went to be baptized by his cousin John. He then began to wander the countryside talking about a new way of life. Mary must have been proud to see how the crowds were attracted to his teaching. Deep in her heart she must have been gratified that the words of the angel were beginning to be fulfilled.

Yet at the same time her security was called into question. Could someone take up the slack in the shop? Who was going to run things? Yet Mary let Jesus go **“Let it be to me according to your word.”**

Mary was there at the end as well. She saw the crowds that once had cheered Jesus turn against him. She heard that the Roman soldiers had arrested him. She was told how Pilate had condemned Jesus to death as a favor to the Jewish establishment. Mary was in the crowd as they led her Son outside the city to the place called the skull. Mary was near the cross as Jesus’ life slowly ebbed away.

Mary must have wondered what this was all about. The messenger of God so many years before had told her that Jesus was to be the longed-for Messiah. She had suffered so much through the years. She had risked her reputation and well-being, yet all the hopes, dreams and promises seemed to be slipping away as Jesus died on the cross.

Yet Mary, unlike most of the other disciples, did not run away. She was there to the very end – **“Let it be to me according to your word.”**

Of course, we know that was not the end of the story. The promise made to Mary

was not in vain. She was able to finally understand the full implication of the angel's message when she learned that Jesus had been raised from death. Her Son was the one to gain victory over sin and death for all people. New life was possible through him. Mary knew that the will of God had been made manifest in her life in a glorious way.

I believe that Mary can be a model of faith for each one of us. She said "yes" to God's purpose for her life. She learned the great lesson that faith is defined as giving assent to God's will. So much of the time people approach religion as being all about bending God's will to our will. We pray that God would do all kinds of things that we would like to see happen. We act as if we are the boss and God is our servant. God is to take care of all our needs, wants and desires.

Mary reminds us that true faith works in reverse. We are called to reconcile ourselves to God's will. We are to seek God's will and then do it. The profound humility and acceptance shown by Mary is a supreme model for us. She models a part of faith that you and I need. She accepted the promises of God and in doing so helped bring salvation to the world.

Mary's life teaches us that when we trust in God it will not mean that our lives will be easy. It does not mean everything will go according to our plans. Just as Mary had hard times so will we. Faith in Jesus does not make life pain free.

But if we trust in the purpose of God it does mean that just as Mary received Jesus into her body, we will receive Christ into our hearts, minds and lives. When we give our wills over to God we too shall, in the end, share in the life of the Risen Christ who grants victory over death.

In the painting in the Church of Sacre Coeur, Mary is the second largest figure. She stands next to the picture of Jesus. In the center of her chest is her heart. Her heart is being offered up to Jesus. She responded to the love that God first had shown her.

Mary was the first Christian.

Mary was the first human person to say yes to Jesus.

This Christmas Season may we allow Mary to be a model for us. May we offer our hearts to the one born in Bethlehem. May we learn to say with Mary:

"Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word."