

Have you ever said yes to something when you either didn't know what would entirely be involved, or when you got into it you found out you were wrong about what you expected. I think the phrase is, "If I would have known that before I started I never would've done it." I recently said yes when the bishop asked me to be chaplain to the Synod Assembly in May. I didn't want to—I find the notion of praying in front of a big crowd of pastors and lay leaders more than a little intimidating. But I said yes anyway.

How many of you, when you first heard your marriage proposal, had any idea what that marriage and life you were saying yes to would entail? How many have said yes to a job change or promotion and later found that you were not only unaware of what would be involved, but maybe not entirely unprepared?

How many have said no to something they later wished they had said yes to? And have you then spent so much time regretting that no that you missed other possible yeses?

Have you ever said yes to a host of other things in order to avoid doing something else, maybe something challenging, maybe something others might see as self-indulgent. Have you said yes to duty and responsibility because it seemed others would value those choices and said no to fun, or growth, or risk because they might seem selfish or irresponsible?

Prior to today's gospel reading we have occasions where two people have the opportunity to say "yes" to God's call.

First the angel Gabriel pays a visit to Zechariah. Now Zechariah was a priest and his wife Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron. Luke's gospel tells us they were faithful

Jews, righteous before God and living blamelessly according to the commandments. It was Zechariah's turn to serve in the sanctuary and offer incense. And while all the people are praying outside, and he's doing his priestly work inside, suddenly the angel Gabriel shows up with startling and unexpected news:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Whew, no small news. Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up on the notion of having children, so that in itself is big news. Besides that, though, there all this other business related to the Holy Spirit and Elijah and making the people ready for the Lord. An awful lot to take in at once. If we were in his shoes, we might have a question or two. And indeed, Zechariah has a question. “How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years?” But Gabriel offers him no wiggle room. “I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of the Lord and I brought you good news.” You can maybe hear behind his words the affront, how could you not believe this good news? And because of his very reasonable question, Zechariah is made mute, unable to speak until the things Gabriel has spoken of come to pass.

Next on Gabriel's agenda, a visit to Mary—a young unmarried woman—engaged to Joseph. Not a priest not related to a priest, not, by all accounts, anybody very special at all. Mary's more than a little startled by Gabriel's appearance as well. And he says to her:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

If Gabriel's message to Zechariah was loaded, this message goes even farther. The son of the most high, the throne of David, an eternal kingdom. For your average Joe, this would be stunning and difficult to process. Not surprisingly, like Zechariah, Mary has a question, “how can this be, since I am a virgin?” And like Zechariah, a pretty reasonable question. But Gabriel cuts her a little more slack and goes on to explain the Holy Spirits' role in the whole business. That's when we hear Mary's humble and gracious assent. “Behold I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be for me according to your word.”

She says yes, and it's one of the most powerful yeses in scripture. She says yes, having no idea what is fully before her, no idea of the challenges, no idea of the pain and sadness, no idea of the extraordinary ways her days will change. She says yes to something that will encompass her whole life. She says yes to God and God's will for her. She says yes to what God has created her for and to what God calls her to. Mary's yes is not just the simple assent to a specific task, Mary's yes is an assent to the whole of God's will and purpose for her life.

She says yes to what is for her absolutely personal, and to what is, for us, the inbreaking of God's kingdom. Her yes becomes our yes.

And that yes is one that we see, and hear and sense affirmed in today's telling of her visit to her cousin Elizabeth.

As she greets Elizabeth, the baby Elizabeth carries—John—leaps in her womb and Elizabeth, through the power of the Spirit, recognizes the presence of her Lord—the presence of Jesus. And she blesses Mary for saying yes, for trusting in God.

And then Mary, herself transformed by this thing that is happening to her, breaks into a marvelous song, maybe one of the best of songs. She sings first of this incredible and extraordinary thing that God has done for her, this very personal thing and then her song moves to name what God has done, is doing and will do for the sake of the world through her, "Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed."

God called Mary to this task not coincidentally, not in the abstract, not because there was no one else. God called Mary because God created Mary to do this thing. God chose to lift her up, to bless her and to favor her beyond all understanding. And to that, Mary says yes.

And it is no less true, that for each of us, God has created us in particular ways, for special tasks, for faithful purposes. God has made us in unique and special ways and God calls us to live into all that he has made us for.

And God calls us to trust enough to say yes.

To say yes, not just to specific jobs—like making a meal for someone who is hungry or sad or lonely, or sending a note to someone who feels forgotten, although God surely calls many of us to that.

To say yes, not just to serving in particular ways, like serving in leadership in the church, or helping in worship, or praying for a child, although God surely calls many of us to that.

To say yes, not just to sharing our blessings—by giving of our money, or our time, or our gifts, although God surely calls many of us to that.

But rather God calls us to say yes to the entirety of the life God has created for us. A life that is rich with blessing. A life that is formed by God's creative purpose. A life that would not be at all were it not for God's incredible love.

God calls us to say yes to the fullness of God's will for us, from our first breath to our last. And God calls us to say yes with joy and thanksgiving and confidence. Confidence that even as God creates and calls us, God will always walk with us.

Mary said yes, and God worked God's extraordinary purpose through her for the sake of the world.

In our yes, God will do no less than to work God's extraordinary purpose through us for the sake of the world. Can you believe that? Can you trust that? Can you hope in that?

But let's return for a minute to Zechariah? When we last heard from Zechariah—well, let's just say, we weren't hearing from Zechariah. One quite reasonable and seemingly to be expected question and the poor man is struck dumb. Mute. He can't speak. He is wordless. Not a good way for a priest to be.

Is that what we risk for a moment of doubt—for the entirely reasonable and expected questions we might have about God's will for us in our lives?

Well, practically speaking, a lack of trust in what God is doing in and for us may very well cause us to lose our ability to speak of God and God's work.

But God wasn't done with Zechariah. God continued with Zechariah as God always does. And his speech came back, his words returned, his ability to sing about God and God's deeds returned and then some. His first words were praise of God and his song marked beautifully the new day that was dawning:

*“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

The light of God has broken upon us in Jesus. And God calls us, and calls us and keeps calling us to live into that light. A light in which we were created, a light that give purpose to our days, a light that leads us into the way of God's will for us. And a light that through us shines the light of God to all people.

Will you say yes to God?