

Yr. C, Advent 4
December 23, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1463 Words

Lessons: Micah 5:2-5a
Canticle 15-Song of Mary
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

Every Sunday morning the celebrant prays for *you*. Right off the bat, the celebrant acknowledges the truth to Almighty God that all our hearts are open, all our desires are known, and none of our secrets are hidden. It is called the Collect for Purity because we pray that God will cleanse—*purify*—the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This devotional prayer sounds so familiar we can easily gloss right over it and not even hear those truth-filled and challenging words. Back in the 11th century the people could not even *hear the prayer* because the priest would say it privately before the service began.

God bless Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, who translated this prayer into English and put it front and center in the very first Anglican prayer book of 1549. From there it has spread all around the world. Chances are very good that—if you were worshipping this morning in any Anglican Church on any continent, attended by the 85 million members of the global Anglican flock—you would hear this prayer.

You would hear this confession that, from the perspective of our Almighty God, all our hearts are already open, all our desires are already known, and all our secrets are already revealed. So, we pray that God's Holy Spirit will cleanse these thoughts of our hearts.

We know God *can do it*. Part of the reason we worship is to offer our consent so that God *will do it*.

You see, the bible teaches us over and over how God *calls us* to follow; God never *compels us* to follow. For some strange reason, Almighty powerful God is just a stickler for consent. Over and over, God *calls* disciples. God never *drafts* disciples or *blackmails* disciples or *bribes* disciples. God just waits...as long as it takes...to hear us say, "Yes."

This is the beautiful, inspiring story of the young woman named Mary. She literally had *everything* to lose when God called her. When Mary received that frightening, confusing visit from Gabriel in her tiny village up in Nazareth, she knew that her life—not just her reputation, *but her life*—was at stake.

And *still*, she said, "Yes. Here am I...Cleanse the thoughts...fears...confusion...and anxiety of my heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that I may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name..."

A few years ago a group of us from St. Peter's made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. My *favorite* church building was the Roman Catholic church in Nazareth which commemorates the visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the angel, Gabriel. I loved all the beautiful mosaics in the large courtyard which depicted Mary. In the ones donated from Europe, she looked European. In the ones donated from church artists in Africa, she looked African. In the ones donated from dioceses in Asia, she looked Asian.

We all know that Mary of Nazareth was a young, Middle Eastern Jew. Yet, we also know that the God who called her—who *invited her*—to carry the Son of God in her body and soul is the very same God who calls and invites *us* to carry Christ in our lives...with our bodies and our souls.

Mary's *particular* consent is a sign that shows the rest of us how to consent...how to say, "Yes" to God. And so we pray, "Cleanse the thoughts...fears...confusion...and anxiety of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name."

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country..." Our St. Peter's group went there, too. My *favorite* church building in the Holy Land is there. (As you can tell, I am unable to have just one favorite.) This church in the village of Ein Karem commemorates the visit Mary made to her relative, Elizabeth, and Zechariah right after she said, "Yes" to God.

I believe Mary traveled all those miles from Galilee down to Judea with this song on her heart. Mary had time, probably days, to ponder what she would say...what she would *sing*. And this morning we got to sing it. "My soul magnifies the greatness of the Lord..."

Do you hear that? Do you hear how this opening phrase of Mary's Song, the *Magnificat*, is the inspiration for the phrase in our weekly prayer of consent. "Almighty God, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we—*like Mary*—may perfectly love you, and—*like Mary*—worthily magnify your holy Name."

In that church courtyard in the Judean hill country, the walls are covered in beautiful tiles with this Song of Mary painted in every language you can imagine. I don't remember precisely, but I think there were more than a hundred versions of this beautiful song about saying "yes" to God...about letting our souls and bodies magnify the greatness of the Lord.

One of the members of our group was from Kenya and he read us the song in Swahili. Several members of our group were from the indigenous people of New Zealand and they read us the song in the Maori language. Our own Mary Pauly read the song in English. Each of us have to find our own words to say "yes" to God. Each of us get to use our own voice to say "yes" to God.

How do you, in your own words and with your own voice, say "yes" to God? What is the song that wells up in your heart and soul which magnifies the greatness of the Lord? What are the deeds you perform that signal your consent to perfectly love God...and therefore, your neighbor?

Just a little further south from Ein Karem is the little town of Bethlehem, home to my *favorite* Church building in the Holy Land! As we heard this morning from the prophet Micah, Bethlehem of Ephrathah is one of the *little* clans of Judah—as unlikely to bring forth the Messiah as little harp-playing-David was of becoming the King of Israel.

You see, God calls the least to do great things. God invites the *most unlikely*—people like you and me—to magnify the greatness of his holy Name. We can't just look to other people or other places for this to happen. We have to look within ourselves for this to happen. Actually, we *get to look within ourselves* for this to happen!

The thing I love about the Church of the Nativity is the doorway. It is less than five feet tall. The *only way* to draw near to the place which commemorates where Jesus was laid in a manger...is to bow down before the Lord.

The place you will find the star which marks the sacred spot is *the lowest* place in the church...in the grotto underneath the altar. No surprise there! We had to go *down* to find the place where Jesus was, just as we get to go all the way down to find where Jesus is *now*, among the least.

Those marble steps in that Church are so worn down from all the pilgrims who have come—century after century—to pay homage to Christ...and to say “yes” to the birth of Christ in our hearts and in our lives.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God makes a *daily* visitation in our lives. Whether we are awake and paying attention or not, we are invited daily to love God more perfectly and to magnify this Love more clearly.

One day, long ago, God paid a visit to an unlikely young woman named Mary, and she said “yes.” Her soul magnified the greatness of the Lord, like no other. Her spirit rejoiced in God our Savior, like no other.

And yet, God continues calling...and inviting...and waiting for us to say, “yes.” God still looks with favor on his lowly servants—people like you and me—who consent to love more perfectly and to serve more readily in ways that magnify Christ’s holy Name. This is not a chore that needs to be accomplished. Rather, it is a gift that we are invited to open...and share.

God knows our hearts are already open, our desires already known, our secrets already revealed. And the Good News is that God wants us to say “yes” anyway.

So on this 4th Sunday of Advent, we once again pray our consent for God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that we may perfectly love and worthily magnify—as *Mary did*—and as we are still invited to do through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.