

## Obedience and Surrender

[Romans 16:25-27](#)

[Luke 1:26-38](#)

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Mary had not been willing? If Mary had said “I’m sorry, I just can’t do that”? Or whether Mary was the first woman that Gabriel was sent to, or whether she was the last to be approached because she was the first to say yes?

We will ever know the answer to those questions. We simply know that Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

This has been a very important verse in my own spiritual life. At a time when I was suffering from very deep depression I found myself responding to God in the language of the traditional King James Version, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” I don’t know now what prompted that response. If there was an angel I certainly didn’t notice it, nor a clear word from heaven, but it became a basic mantra for my life. One of the two or three times that I can point to and say that God spoke to me.

In the Biblical narrative there are a handful of accounts of prophets being specifically called by God: I’m thinking of Samuel hearing God at night in the temple, Isaiah seeing the court of heaven; and both Jeremiah and Moses trying to get away with saying that they were not good at public speaking. Of course, there were many other prophets but we don’t have their accounts of being called to be prophets.

Most of us never or only rarely hear God’s voice as clearly as we are told Mary heard Gabriel that day. Most of us are like the majority of prophets and other Biblical figures – we just do what’s in front of us in

the place where we find ourselves. But even those prophets with no story of calling must have responded in some way to an urging from God.

And so have you.

Because it is God's grace, God's love expressed to us through the Christ, that encourages us and calls us to follow him. Some of us long for a big call – we long for the angel to show up, the messenger to arrive on our doorstep or come to us in a dream saying “This is what I want you to do with your life...” Some of us would settle for an audible, “Yes kiddo, I'm real.” But those experiences are rare. Does that mean that God does not speak to us? No not at all... it's just a whole load more subtle.

Let's go back to Mary's response. It's simple and complete,” Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She hears God speaking through the angel and she places herself in readiness – she surrenders to God in the obedience of faith. Obedience comes from the same linguistic root as to hear. To be obedient is to hear and then to do.

The great tradition of the Deuteronomist which colors much of our reading of the Hebrew Scriptures may be summed up as “obey God's laws and you will prosper.” Be obedient and you will be ok. But actually that didn't work out so well, and in Romans, Paul explains that it didn't work out because they got hung up on seeing how well they could obey the laws and forgot that that was just a vehicle for expressing their love for God. Obedience in and of itself is not of much interest to God who is infinitely relational. God's longing is for deep intimate relationship with a redeemed humanity. Let me say that again, God's longing is for deep intimate relationship with a redeemed humanity.

And we, the church, are the beginning of that. We are the ones who are called to be the fore-runners, the first-fruits of that new relationship, the relationship of the New Covenant. How do we know that? Dare I say,” Because the Bible tells me so”? Yes scripture says it and our own spirits

respond with a yes. Aren't there moments when some snatch of a hymn, some passing phrase of a sermon or a scripture reading snags at your heart and to mix metaphors, it leaps like the child in Elizabeth's womb when she heard Mary arriving?

In those moments we hear and we know that we are the beloved, we are the ones whom God is calling into closer relationship. How hard is it to be obedient to that call? How hard was it for the prodigal son to run into his father's arms? That's what obedience means – it means to abide in God's love and to do what that deep relationship calls us to do.

Some of you are playing Angels and Mortals this Christmas and because you have made that choice you are obedient to the idea of the game – I hear that you have been sneaking into each other's front yards with special surprises and keeping Gabriel busy passing messages and photos and videos. This is not, I hope, a difficult obedience. But it is obedience – because of the rules of the game you are behaving in ways you don't normally.

Obedience to God is not a fearful thing. It is listening and then doing – or being – because God often does not ask us to **do** something – thank goodness we are not all called to get pregnant – but God asks us to **be**. God asks us to be the light of the world. God asks us to be participants in the Body of Christ. God asks us to be the yeast which brings Godness to our community.

Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary did not have to do anything immediately to be obedient, she just said yes, she gave her assent.

And in doing so she surrendered. That's another scary word for us. Surrender Dorothy! To surrender seems to mean giving up, playing dead.

But in the spiritual life it means something completely different. In the spiritual life it means giving yourself to God in love – allowing God's

love to permeate you. The mystics use very sexual language to express this. Surrender means that we no longer need to struggle to find God's love, we just let ourselves go into her arms.

It goes hand in glove with obedience. God calls, we hear and we run to her, (or on some cases we drag our feet, afraid that this is not a good plan) and then we let go in trust. I make it sound simple but this is the work of a lifetime. We are gifted with freewill and it is our constant desire to do it our way – to push away from God and to think it all depends on us.

Perhaps that is what Jesus struggled with during his days fasting in the wilderness. The three temptations – to use supernatural powers to get food, power and acclaim – were all temptations to use his will in a way which was not in alignment with his calling. He chose not to do that but to remain obedient to his destiny, to remain in deep intimate relationship with his Father.

Jesus gave us a different model for obedience. He showed us that obedience is not keeping to the letter of a law and then thinking that we are just so righteous; obedience is living in close relationship with God the Creator, the one whom Jesus called Abba and following through to the end. And this relationship is a gift that God gives us, not a reward for being good. Obedience to the God of compassion and integrity is living with compassion and integrity and surrender is trusting that whatever happens along that road, the arms of God are always underneath us.

God is calling you this morning - God is calling me too – into a closer relationship, a relationship of obedience and surrender to the God who is all in all.

Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

