

## ADVENT IV

St. Luke 1:38 Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me as you have said."

Mary's 'yes' to God is an expression of what it means to live the reality of our theme for today, "Recognize Emmanuel – God with us." God in our midst or God is with us, is a fundamental message for the people of God as we enter this final week of Advent. Though we testify to the reality of God with us we are nevertheless mindful that some persons, including people of faith, are not always conscious of ways in which God in our midst is made known. Mary's 'yes' to God, therefore, is a sign that our 'yes' on a daily basis, as we interact with each other, also has the potential to reveal God to us.

Each time we say 'yes' to each other, we affirm the fact that God's purpose is being revealed in our midst. Saying 'yes' is a commitment that we are willing to make life better for ourselves and others. Saying 'yes' to a child, for example, affirms in that child the fact that adults care for her or his wellbeing. While saying 'no' to the child, for example, is one way to affirm responsibility as an adult, saying 'yes', equally affirms our willingness to make life better for ourselves and those with whom we live.

Mary's 'yes' to God came as a consequence of the message that God is in our midst, that God intends to save humanity, and, above all, "With God nothing is impossible." Saying 'yes' to God affirms belief in God as Emmanuel, belief that Jesus has come to deliver us from the power of sin, evil and death, and, affirms God's presence in our midst. By saying 'yes'

we are acknowledging God's power to transform or change the challenges which confront us on a daily basis. At 12 or 13 years old saying 'yes' to God could not have been an easy thing for Mary. Can you recall what life was like when you were twelve or 13 years old, or, are you going to be like some who says, "I can't recall." I remember at 12 years old I was still sucking my thumb. My siblings did everything in their power to make me stop. I eventually stopped when I felt it was no longer fashionable to do so. Nevertheless, like Mary, at 12 years old, I was very involved in the Church and was attending services on a regular basis. Like Mary, therefore, it is possible for children to be examples to us of what it means to say 'yes' to God or to live our lives in obedience to God.

Unlike Mary, Luke says nothing about Joseph's 'yes' to God. Luke only mentions the fact that Mary was engaged to Joseph. Joseph's response to Mary's pregnancy and God's role in it is not seemingly important to Luke as he is addressing a Gentile audience. While he indicates that Joseph is a descendant of the family of David, the important thing is not Jesus' Jewish ancestry but Jesus' capacity to save people since he is the "Son of God". Gentiles or non-Jews, Luke implies, are not so much concerned about Jesus' family connection; they are more concerned about the difference Jesus can make in their lives. Mary's 'yes' to God, therefore, and the subsequent transformation or change in her life, are signs of what it means to recognize God in our midst, and, to allow God's presence and power to transform or change the reality of our lives.

Zachariah and Elizabeth, six months before Mary, experienced God's presence and power in their lives and things were never the same again.

Upon recognizing God's presence and power in their lives, the lives of the two senior citizens were immediately transformed. Just as I asked earlier whether we could recall when we were twelve years old, we now have to ask our senior citizens whether they would respond like Zachariah and Elizabeth if they were told they would be giving birth to a child. Even more dramatic is the fact that this elderly couple was never given the privilege of having children when they were young. Is it any surprise Zachariah was overcome with shock when God visited him in the temple? Zachariah recognized God in the temple; however, he was a bit slow in allowing God to transform the reality of his life and that of his family. Intent on using Zachariah and his family in the plan of salvation, God demonstrates to Zachariah that, as Mary says, "With God all things are possible." Zachariah's 'no', therefore, became Elizabeth's 'yes', and together this celebrated couple has left the legacy that it is possible to say yes to God even in the midst of challenges.

In an article entitled, "The Meaning of Life," author Clifford Goldstein points out that our 'yes' to God affirms our belief in the innate meaning of life. Goldstein says there are two types of people in the world. In one group we have those who are of the view there is no meaning to life. To this end, not much should be made of the 'yes' we say on a daily basis as they express nothing more than the fact that the universe is a meaningless reality that is simply waiting its time to be dissolved. He quotes the well-known playwright, William Shakespeare, who says, "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." This expression, the writer notes, expresses the view of Frederick Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who asked the question, "*How does one build a meaning for life when the very*

*fabric of life and all that it has to work with is 'just a system' a 'pointless one at that?'* For Nietzsche, and others like him, Goldstein says, saying 'yes' to God is as pointless as life itself.

For Goldstein, however, there is another group which views saying 'yes' to God as a means of affirming the central teaching of Jesus. He echoes the meaning of a phrase in the Collect for today. In the Collect we pray, "Purify our conscience we beseech you O Lord by your daily visitation..." This "daily visitation" does not just require our 'yes' to God; it is the fact that God has placed eternity in the heart of every human being. Just as Mary was given the privilege to carry Jesus in her womb for nine months so we may carry eternity or Emmanuel with us for eternity.

Victor Frankl, the neurologist and psychiatrist from Vienna, Austria, who survived the brutality of the Nazis camp, in affirming the possibility to say 'yes' to God says, "*He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.*" It is what he refers to as the will to meaning. That is, living a 'why' or a 'yes' means commitment to a pathway through life even if all the way is not filled with light. So, though Mary could not see all the implications of her saying 'yes' to God, nevertheless, she willed herself to say 'yes'. By her resounding 'yes' to God she also said 'yes' to God for generations after her who now have a model, a pattern to follow, in terms of what it means to live a life of faith in God. The lesson here of course is that once we are willing to say 'yes' to God, once we are willing to uncover the meaning of life, it is possible that, like Mary and Joseph, like Zachariah and Elizabeth, our lives will be transformed or changed for the better. True, unlike Elizabeth and Mary, the transformation may not be pregnancy; however, since "with God

nothing is impossible', in saying 'yes' to God we must be willing to have our lives transformed or changed.

Mary says to God, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me as you have said." It was her way of expressing the reality of living a life of obedience or commitment to God. Her 'yes' or obedience expresses what it means to trust God even when things are not clear to us. Joseph and Zachariah were not as willing, at least initially, to say 'yes' to God; nevertheless, they eventually said 'yes' and their lives too were transformed. We too will be transformed for eternity by our 'yes' to God and we can help in the transformation of our lives and that of others as we encourage them to say 'yes' to God who is speaking to the conscience through daily visitations.