

December 24, 2017
Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Faith Unto Submission”

Luke 1:26-38

In my humble opinion, Gabriel’s declaration to young Mary about the coming of the Messiah is probably the single greatest angelic announcement in Holy Scripture. Admittedly the announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds has more panache, what with the heavenly host in glory singing “Hosanna in the highest” and all, but I think this one is the tops. Not because of Gabriel, and not because of the wonderful message he brings, but because of Mary’s reaction.

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

This is not just a statement of great faith; it is a statement of humble submission to God’s will as His possession. You don’t get a whole lot of this in the world, in the church, and even in Holy Scripture.

Moses tried to talk his way out of being God’s prophet. Jonah actually ran away from the job! I think every single king of Israel or Judah got full of themselves and wouldn’t follow God at some point in their reign. Even Christ’s disciples were jockeying for the best spots in the kingdom!

The worldly outside of Christ most certainly don’t want to submit to a God they deny. But even inside the church among believing Christians, we just don’t want to submit. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying we don’t love Jesus, follow Him or desire the forgiveness, life and salvation He brings us in Word and Sacrament.

However, we call Him “Lord” and think of Him as such, but very, very often, only to a point. We consider ourselves His servant, true, but we assign a job description of our own making to that. We might say, “Let it be to me according to your word,” but we then become managers of that word, designing how far it’s actually put into practice in life.

We don’t have to look too far in our lives to see ourselves doing this. St. Paul writes of how in Christ we are to “*renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,*” and Jesus Himself tells of how evil and sexually immoral thoughts defile a person. Yet consider some of the things Christians choose for “entertainment.” We manage God’s will by saying it’s just a book, movie or TV show; it doesn’t count. We know it counts. We just don’t want to obey our Lord there.

Whose wealth is it? With our lips we say it all belongs to God, right? Christ tells some pretty clear parables about servants managing stuff in God’s service. Tithing is regular practice in the Old Testament and in St. Paul says Christians should decide what to give in their hearts. But in practice is God just getting leftovers because we want to serve ourselves first with our cash? I fear that way too often saying “I can’t afford to give” is just rationalizing the truth that our job description of “servant” puts the priority on serving ourselves first and considering the boss, the Lord, last.

If we just worked our way backward through the Ten Commandments I’m sure each one of us could find where we’ve failed on a regular basis because we just don’t want to submit to God’s will. And when we arrive at Commandment number one the reason becomes crystal clear. “You shall have no other gods.” We don’t let God be God. We spurn His Lordship, count ourselves as something grander than just His creation, possession and servant and attempt instead to mold and manipulate God, His Word and His will to fit into our self-centered design for life.

And basically, that is what sin is at the core—denying God is our God, and jumping outside of His design for us. And it is pretty scary, because although Jesus' first advent was as a suffering servant savior, His second advent in glory will be as judge.

But this is why Mary's words are so comforting for us. Mary was not without sin, regardless of what the Roman Catholic Church says. She wasn't some supernatural being. She wasn't endowed with some unique indwelling of the Holy Spirit that hasn't ever been seen before or since, at least not before Christ's conception in her womb—that was truly unique. She was just a young woman who the Spirit empowered to hear God's Word and believe it. She had faith.

You have faith also. It may not be as strong a faith as Mary's, but God promises not to break the bruise reed or snuff out the smoldering wick. God works forgiveness with weak faith. (pause) But don't be satisfied with it.

Paul writes, *"To him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ..."*

In your turning to Christ for the forgiveness He most certainly gives, seek also strengthening of your faith in Him. Take time to ponder the enormity of what He has done for you in saving you, his person, from your sin. Remind yourself of all that He is, the prophet who proclaims God's grace, the priest who gains that grace through His own sacrifice and resurrection, and the King—your king—who has come and will come again.

And in emulation of Mary, seek to do the tough thing that is totally counter to our self-aggrandizing nature—seek to submit to His Lordship. This takes an intentional effort, because submission is the last thing your sinful flesh desires. Meekness is not something your culture teaches. Slave is not a vocation you wear comfortably.

But it is our reality. It is a truth young Mary knew as fact. *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord."* You are God's creation, made for His use. There is no getting around that. The only question is if you're a faithful servant or a rebellious one.

But why on earth would you be rebellious? Why even flirt with that by attempting to manage your faith in your king in some manner your sinful nature deems acceptable? No, seek to submit to your Savior. You know He is Lord. You know He absolutely deserves to be your Lord because of all He has done to save you. Joyfully submit to Him. It is good to be the Lord's slave, because the slave says, *"Let it be to me according to your word."*

And what is that Word? His Word is life. His Word is forgiveness. His Word is Gospel good news for you this day and into eternity. His Word says to you in the day of judgment, *"Do not be afraid...for you have found favor with God"* in His Son, Jesus Christ.

We all struggle with the First Commandment problem of submitting to God. And in the end, that is probably the beginning of faith, admitting that God is God and you are not. But faith ultimately find its target in Christ. In Christ Jesus we find that submitting to Christ is submitting to God's love. This is what Mary did, submitted her body and life, that eternal life for dying mankind would enter the world through her womb from the depth and breadth of God's love for us.

Be like Mary. Have faith. Submit to God. Submit to His life and love shining on you, His servant, forever.

Amen.