

**Mary's Yes: the Power of Humble Obedience**  
**Sunday, August 11, 2024, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Jonathan Timothy Stoner**

On this Feast of Mary the mother of Jesus, we come together to honor the profound mystery and grace of the woman chosen to bear the Savior of the world. In our readings today, we encounter this golden thread, this sacred cord of divine intervention, humility, and transformation that links the stories of Judith, Mary, and the vision of the new Jerusalem adorned as a bride for her beloved.

We are about to go on a bit of a quest - heck, let's call it an adventure - to explore how these passages illuminate Mary's crucial role in God's redemptive plan and how they speak to us today. Our journey begins with the story of Judith, a courageous woman who played a crucial role in Israel's deliverance. In today's passage, Uzziah praises Judith for her bravery and faithfulness, recognizing her as blessed by God for her act of salvation. Her willingness to risk her life for her people in a time of dire need demonstrates profound faith and courage. Uzziah's blessing speaks to God's providential care working through humble and unexpected instruments.

Our reading occurs within the broader narrative of the Book of Judith, a text that tells the heroic story of a Jewish woman who saves her people from the Assyrian general Holofernes. After Judith's successful mission to take out Holofernes, she returns to her people, and Uzziah, the city's magistrate, offers a blessing in recognition of her bravery and the help of the divine that made her efforts successful. Now if you've ever seen Caravaggio's painting "Judith Beheading Holofernes" then you probably have a vivid and visceral mental image of what took place in this story.

When I read about her mission to take out Holofernes you may have thought I would have had the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* come to mind saying, "Off with his head!" But no, where my mind went was that scene in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* where Eowyn, the niece of King Théoden is fighting the Witch-King of Angmar. The Nazgul tells Eowyn, "No man can slay me." And you all remember the scene right, how does Eowyn respond, "I. Am. No. Man." as she lobs off his head. This is also the kind of fierce and formidable feminine energy we're seeing in this election cycle, and I am here for it!

But back to Judith's story... Uzziah's blessing acknowledges her exceptional role in God's plan for deliverance. By calling Judith "blessed" above all women on earth, Uzziah is highlighting her unique status and divine favor. This mirrors the language used in the New Testament to describe Mary's favor in today's Gospel where the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and says, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." The emphasis is on Judith's active role in the divine intervention that led to the salvation of her people, thus elevating her status in the eyes of God and humanity.

Uzziah praises God, the creator of heaven and earth, recognizing God's sovereignty and power in guiding Judith's actions. This acknowledgment serves to connect her personal victory to the broader narrative of divine intervention in human history. Reinforcing the idea that Judith's success was not merely due to her own courage but was orchestrated by God. She was a vessel of God's mercy that permeates the Magnificat, Mary's Song of Praise—this mercy that flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before the Holy One.

This God, who bares Her arms and shows off Her strength like Rosie the Riveter, scatters the bluffing braggarts, knocking the tyrants off their high horses and pulling victims out of the mud. She invites the starving poor to sit down to a banquet and provides hungry children with a FREE breakfast and lunch every single day of the school year, while the callous rich are left muttering alone out in the cold.

This very same God who embraces Her chosen children, gathering them under her wings like a mother hen sheltering her precious chicks under the warmth of her wings; remembering and piling on the mercies that are new every morning, piling them high. It's exactly what God has promised to God's people, beginning with Abraham and right up until today.

Uzziah expresses that Judith's faithfulness and the divine power she demonstrated will be remembered by future generations. This reflects the biblical theme of the enduring impact of faith and divine intervention that infuses the stories in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews chapter 11, that gives us so many examples of female heroes in the Hebrew Scriptures who stand out for their courage and trust in God's promises.

Sarah and Rahab are the only women mentioned by name, which is truly a shame, but Esther, Ruth, Deborah, Jael, and the Widow of Zarephath, are all alluded to in Hebrews 11. Each one of these amazing women exemplify unwavering trust and bold action in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, invincible foes, and overwhelming odds.

Their stories highlight the important role that women through the ages, by their faith and bravery, contributed to the unfolding of God's redemptive plan and inspire us to embrace our own faith journeys with similar courage and conviction. Judith's actions in today's reading are a testament to God's power and a source of inspiration for future generations. And here in this text we see a pattern that we see repeatedly in Scripture of remembering and recounting God's mighty deeds in human history, particularly during periods of upheaval and transition, such as what our church is experiencing.

In times like we're living in, when our nation is facing the threat of a looming darkness sweeping across our land from sea to shining sea, this pattern of remembrance and leaning into our faith becomes all the more vital. The passage from Judith concludes by recognizing her exceptional role and divine favor, celebrating God's power, and emphasizing the lasting impact of courageous and faithful actions. It underscores how such acts generate a cascade of blessings across generations and calls to mind the 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm where the Psalmist declares that "the unfailing love of the Eternal is always and everlasting for those who

reverently run after Him, extending justice on and on to future generations, to those who will keep God's bond of love and remember to walk in the guidance of God's commands."

In the same vein as Judith's story, we see Mary's humble acceptance of her role in the Gospel of Luke (1:26–37). When the angel Gabriel announces that she will conceive the Son of the Most High, Mary's humble and courageous response still astounds to this day, especially when you consider the fact that Mary was between 12 to 14 years old according to historians. The words that she uttered in that pivotal moment have echoed down through the centuries: "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever God wants. May everything you said come true."

Her response has stood the test of time because it reflects her total openness and trust in God's plan. Mary's response is mind-blowing for fearful and trembling mortals like me who are often afraid to pray "may your kingdom come and may your will be done" in my life because I'm terrified of where God might send me or what God might ask me to do.

Mother Teresa offers a profound perspective on this transformative aspect of faith. She once said, "I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things."

This sentiment beautifully encapsulates Mary's response. It's not just about asking God to intervene in the world but about being transformed ourselves and embracing the role that God invites us to play. Mary's acceptance and our response to God's call are intertwined with the understanding that our prayers and actions can bring about significant change, not just in our own lives but in the world.

Mary the Mother of Jesus, just like Judith, is chosen not because of her status in society but because of her willingness to surrender herself to God's will. Both women Judith and Mary embody the divine intervention that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary through faith and obedience.

As Rob Bell argues in his book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, these decisive moments and key figures that significantly alter the trajectory of human history function much like hinges—much more significant than we can possibly imagine when we're in the thick of it. Just as a hinge on a door allows it to open and close, these historical turning points enable significant shifts and transformations in societies, cultures, and civilizations.

The son of Mary, as Bell tells it, was not just a historical figure but a revolutionary force whose message of love, forgiveness, and justice has profoundly influenced the course of human history. According to *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, Jesus is THE "hinge of history" because his way of life and message challenge the principalities and existing power structures and invite a new way of being in the world.

Bell's perspective highlights how Jesus's impact extends way beyond religious or spiritual realms, shaping and reshaping the very fabric of history and culture forever. Mary's response to the angelic message is beautifully captured in the Magnificat, Mary's Song of Praise that we heard read aloud this morning.

This hymn of praise that erupted from the depths of Mary's heart – that is so pure and innocent and full of childlike faith that it makes me want to weep – and it reveals a profound understanding of God's justice and mercy that is perhaps best understood by children and those who are children at heart.

Mary sings of how God has “scattered the arrogant in the intent of their hearts,” “brought down the powerful from their thrones,” and “lifted up the lowly.” Her song is not merely personal thanksgiving but a prophetic declaration of the coming kingdom where God's justice will be realized, and it will not just be revealed later but will be revealed in the here and now in the fearless and faithful actions of the prophets of our day.

These prophets who are not afraid to rock the boat or ruffle some feathers as they proclaim the bold, provocative, exuberant, and joyous in-your-face-truth that people like me who have grown comfortable and apathetic desperately need to hear. These prophet's declarations make us uncomfortable in the moment, don't they? And I think it's because we know that if we listen with an open heart and mind and absorb these truth bombs it's going to demand that we change our ways and change is always uncomfortable and hard.

The Magnificat resonates with the themes in Judith's story. Just as Judith's bravery led to the salvation of her people and a reversal of their fortunes, Mary's acceptance of her role heralds a greater reversal: the overthrow of worldly power structures that marginalize and oppress human beings made in God's image and the lifting up of the downtrodden.

Both narratives highlight how God acts decisively through those who are faithful and humble to bring about a new order, a new beginning for God's people. That's how it was at the birth of the Christian movement in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. But as Howard Thurman notes in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Christianity is “a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering” but it “has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.”

How do we get back to Mary's vision where God overturns traditional power dynamics by bringing “down the powerful from their thrones and [lifting] up the lowly” (Luke 1:52)? Are we a people whose expression of Christianity confronts the injustices perpetrated by worldly powers, or have we embraced a version of Christianity that Howard Thurman critiques as “sterile and of little avail” due to its being “muffled, confused, and vague”?

Have we settled for siding with “the strong against the weak” simply to secure our own “security and respectability”? I look at our nation’s complicity in the ongoing genocide in Gaza, where nearly 40,000 people have been killed—most of them women and children, noncombatants—and

I am not just deeply grieved, I am horrified. I think of the picture our brother Rev. Munther Isaac posted of a statue of the baby Jesus in a pile of rubble in his church in Bethlehem and I imagine Jesus there in his birthplace wailing inconsolably along with the mothers who have lost all their children and the children who have lost all their family members, and I wonder if we in the United States are deaf to their cries?

Like many of you out there I wonder what I can do in the face of the injustices and acts of pure evil I see in our world and then I am reminded of little Mary who was little more than a child when the angel appeared to her and yet she said “Yes!” to partnering with God — and it changed the course of our world forever.

Madeline L’Engle, a profound spiritual influence in my life, highlights that “not one of us is qualified,” yet God often chooses those who seem least capable to fulfill God’s work. According to L’Engle, if we think ourselves qualified, we risk confusing our own efforts with God’s divine work and glory. Instead, acknowledging our inadequacies helps us avoid this mistake.

She envisions God coming to each of us and saying, “Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me,” inviting us to be vessels for God’s redemptive plans. This mirrors the faith described in Hebrews 11, where figures like Sarah, Rahab, Esther, Ruth, and Deborah exemplify “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Their faith empowered them to say yes to God’s call, becoming instruments of God’s purposes despite their own limitations. Our response can be like Mary’s, declaring, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” and embracing our role in God’s redemptive mission.

When we say yes, we align ourselves with God’s plans for our generation, understanding that refusal not only affects us but impacts many others, even those yet to be born. To be true vessels for this divine work, we need what L’Engle describes as “the humble, courageous obedience of Mary” and a childlike openness to God’s transformative realities. Through such faith, obedience, and action, we become co-workers with God, participating in the realization of God’s redemptive purposes in our lifetimes and beyond.

Our final passage from Revelation offers a vision of the new heaven and new earth where God dwells with humanity in perfect harmony. The new Jerusalem, adorned as a bride for her beloved, symbolizes the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises and the end of all sickness, suffering, and death. This vision speaks to the ultimate transformation that Mary’s Son, Jesus, will bring into the world. Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus becomes a tangible symbol of this New Creation.

By bearing the Savior, she becomes the bridge between the old and new covenants—the embodiment of hope and renewal. In Mary, we see the anticipation of the new Jerusalem, where God’s presence will be fully realized and where the old order of pain and death will pass away. But we’re not there yet, so the work continues, and we are invited to partner with God in the here and now as agents of the New Creation. We do this by nonviolently resisting the bluffing braggarts and the tyrants sitting atop their high horses, pulling the victims they’ve trampled on out of the mud, and inviting the starving poor to sit down to a banquet where they are given the highest seat of honor.

As we celebrate Mary today, we honor her not only as the mother of Jesus but as a profound symbol of faithfulness and humility. Mary exemplifies unwavering devotion and openness to God's plan, embodying a heart wholly dedicated to divine purposes. Her life encourages us to open our hearts to God's call and embrace what God wants to bring forth through us. The story of Mary reflects the divine justice and mercy foretold by Judith, declared in the Magnificat, and fulfilled in the vision of the New Jerusalem.

This morning, if you find yourself feeling profoundly unqualified and wondering, "Who am I to make a difference?" remember that “not one of us is qualified.” Remember that God chooses "the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” and “the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

Just as God used a poor peasant girl living under Roman occupation to bring Christ into the world in the inauspicious setting of a smelly barn, God calls us to be vessels for God’s plans in our generation and it’s not about how gifted or eloquent or influential or wealthy or connected we are, it’s simply about whether we choose to say “Yes!”

So let us respond with humility and courage when God calls, echoing Mary’s words: "Here am I, let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.