

The “Will” of God

Luke 1:26-56

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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December 14, 2025/Third Sunday of Advent

I’m going to ask you to indulge me for a few minutes at the outset of this sermon. 😊

As my sabbatical earlier this year was drawing to a close, I decided to tackle a project that I had been putting off. I decided it was high time to organize my sermons in some kind of a concise, systematic way.

This would not be easy, I knew. It would require prolonged exposure to—even the creation of—a *spreadsheet*. The very thought sent shivers up my spine. But I boldly pressed on.

And so, all the way back to my first sermon in the church we attended in Vancouver while I was in grad school, through my around monthly sermons in my first pastoral role in Nanaimo, and the majority of my sermons, which have been preached here at Lethbridge Mennonite...

I created a single Excel “Sermons” file, which could be searched by date, scripture, special theme, etc. One “workbook with a “sheet” for each year, with the titles all linked to the sermon files themselves.

It’s quite something (I’m sure you’re awe-struck by now).

At any rate, one of the things spreadsheets do really well, I discovered, is math. And in the process of creating this spreadsheet, I came to the realization that a very significant milestone would show up some time during Advent.

Today, as it happens.

This Sunday marks the 500th sermon I have preached here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

That is a lot of sermons. A lot of words. A lot of bad jokes. A few too many rock and roll references. A lot of digressions. A lot of conclusions that maybe seemed too long in coming. A lot of self-indulgent introductions that had nothing to do with the sermon. 😊

But I hope also, a lot of the gospel. A lot of the good news of Jesus Christ who came to seek and to save that which was lost.

At any rate, these milestones are undoubtedly more significant to me than to others. But they do provide me with an occasion to say thank you to you—for your patience and longsuffering, for your kind affirmations and gentle critiques, your good questions and promptings. Your attention, which is no small thing these days!

It is a gift to be part of such a supportive community, one where we can wrestle with Scripture and what it means to follow Jesus faithfully together.

So, for number 500, I have an explosive sermon planned, full of hermeneutical novelty and theological fireworks and soaring oratory, not to mention a multimedia extravaganza!

Just kidding. I'm not planning on any of those things. You should know that by now 😊

As you also know by now, the theme we are working with this Advent is “The Power of Yes.” We are exploring the “yesses” in and around the Christmas story and how they invite us to say “yes” to the God who is always breaking into the story of our world and the story of our lives.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, we encounter perhaps the most famous, or at least most significant “yes” in all of Scripture.

Mary's response to the angel Gabriel has echoed down through the ages: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

It is held up as a model of piety and obedience, submission and devotion. Her song—*The Magnificat*—is in many ways, the song of the season. And we'll get to that.

But I want to begin with something that I've noticed in the Scriptures and stories thus far this Advent in our first three Sundays on this theme of “The Power of Yes.”

The “yeses” we’ve been looking at aren’t exactly explicit. Sometimes they are only implied. Sometimes they are gradual, maybe even tentative (as we saw with Zechariah). Sometimes it is a yes to a demanding message (as we saw with John the Baptist). They usually involve some confusion and gradual alignment of human wills to God’s.

In talking about the “yeses” of the familiar texts of the Christmas season, we can easily give the impression that God asks a question and waits for us to answer (preferably in the affirmative) before he proceeds.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that this isn’t exactly how things go.

It’s not as though Gabriel approached Mary and said, “Now Mary, God has this really cool and surprising idea in mind for the salvation of the world, and it could involve you if you’re willing, but we’ll need you to sign on before we proceed.”

He doesn’t give his best pitch for “project virgin birth” and then wait expectantly while Mary deliberates, yes or no.

In a similar way to the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah from two weeks ago, the angel simply declares what *will* happen.

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you **will** conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you **will** name him Jesus. ³² He **will** be great and **will** be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God **will** give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He **will** reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there **will** be no end.

Speaking of math, that’s seven “wills.”

After Mary has a few questions about how all this is going to happen given her marital status and the basics of human biology and reproduction (again, not exactly a straightforward “yes” here), Gabriel goes on:

The Holy Spirit **will** come upon you, and the power of the Most High **will** overshadow you; therefore the child to be born **will** be holy; he **will** be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the

sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing **will** be impossible with God.

That's five more "wills" in the follow-up, for those keeping score. Twelve "wills" in seven sentences (in English). These things *will happen*.

Mary's role, as with Elizabeth and Zechariah's, is to align her will with God's "wills" (pun 100% intended). To accept her part in the story that God is telling.

Now, we of course assume that God is not coercive, that God will not overrule human wills (although the power of the Most High is said to "overshadow" Mary...).

But in general, we see far too much evidence throughout Scripture that it is indeed possible to say "no" to God (see Israel's entire history of idolatry—and ours).

I remain convinced that the theme of our Advent series—that of saying "yes" to God's plan and purposes in our lives—is a good and necessary one. We are not passive agents in God's story.

But these "yeses" we speak of operate within the context of the mystery of how God's will and our wills interact. Which is a very deep mystery indeed (perhaps the subject of a faith question in January).

Our "yeses" are not the key that unlocks the door of God's plan, without which the door would remain stubbornly, helplessly shut.

It's more like a river that is flowing toward the sea; our "yeses" involve going with the flow, with movement that is already happening and will continue to happen.

God does not need our yes, even though he seeks it. God's story *will* be told.

Indeed, Mary's "yes" is described later in the passage more as *belief* than *assent*. Elizabeth says to her,

And blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Blessed is she who *believed*.

And out of Mary's belief comes this amazing song that we hear each year. *The Magnificat*.

This song of joy that comes in response to the astonishing announcement that a peasant teenager in an insignificant town in a tiny outpost of the first century Roman Empire was going to give birth to the long-awaited culmination of Israel's hope.

She sings of:

- The scattering of the proud;
- The dethroning of the powerful and arrogant;
- The raising up of the lowly;
- The filling of the hungry with "good things."

She sings for joy of the conviction that when Israel's God comes, it is good news for those used to bad news.

And perhaps most surprisingly, Mary's song is present tense!

In response to the angel Gabriel's "wills"—all the things that *will* happen—Mary responds with a bunch of "hases."

The Lord *has* done these things, she says.

Which is strange, because Jesus hasn't even done anything yet. He hasn't preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn't overthrown any rulers. There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich, plenty of vulnerable people who suffer disproportionately.

The oppressive Roman Empire marches on. Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been born!!

Yet Mary somehow knows that the baby she will carry marks the turning point of God's story.

In many ways, we live our lives in between the “wills” of God and the “hases” of Mary’s song.

Each year around Advent, I confess to feeling a mixture of excitement and a touch of weariness.

How could one not get excited about the birth of Christ, the Christmas season? The beginning of the Christian year, like the beginning of our new years in January, comes with fresh hope, optimism, the anticipation of newness.

The Christian calendar provides a structure to the life of faith that I have come to appreciate. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time, and then back to the top. I like the rhythm, the predictability. I like keeping time with Jesus instead of the marketers and the shopping malls.

But sometimes there can be a routine quality to the Christian calendar as well. Jesus comes, Jesus teaches and does some cool stuff, Jesus dies, comes back from the dead, promises to come again. A church is born. Around and around we go.

And wars and rumours of war grind inexorably on... And people fall apart... And death persists... and the oldness seems more obvious than the newness.

The gap between the “wills” of God and the “hases” of Mary’s song sometimes seem like a chasm, one that we long to be eliminated.

I was listening to a podcast earlier this week where the hosts were talking about Christmas and how it so often fails to live up to our expectations, how we often direct so much of our longing to something that can’t possibly fulfill it.

One of the hosts talked about a sermon he had recently from Amanda McMillen, an Episcopal priest from Virginia. She had a memorable title for her Second Sunday of Advent sermon last week: **“We think we want Christmas. What we really want is the second coming.”**

I’m pretty sure I haven’t come up with a title that good in five hundred sermons!

We talk often about the two “comings” of Christ during Advent. We look back to Christ’s first coming in Bethlehem’s manger and ahead to Christ’s coming again in glory.

My sense is that even though we say that Advent is about both comings, most of our emotional energy goes into looking back.

This is understandable. It’s easier to look backward than forward. The past contains known quantities, stories and experiences. The past can be a source of nostalgia or regret or joy or sorrow, but it’s (usually) based on things that have happened.

(I say “usually” because we can remember falsely... that’s a topic too big to get into this morning.)

The future is unknown.

And this is true in the Christian story as well. When we look back, we can point to specific events, with characters and narrative and dialogue (as we saw last night in the children’s pageant!).

When we look forward, there is less specificity. We reach for biblical metaphors of swords into plowshares and streets of gold and lions laying down with lambs, etc.

But it can all seem a bit indeterminate and hypothetical. I have yet to see a pageant about the second coming 😊

So, it can be easier and more natural to project our longings to the past instead of the future.

But I love that title from Amanda McMillen. I think it speaks a deep truth, perhaps one that we only come to understand over time. *We think we want Christmas, but what we actually want is the second coming.*

Around eighty-five years ago, C.S. Lewis preached a famous sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford. It was later published as *The Weight of Glory* in 1941.

Lewis speaks about how each of us has a deep longing for what he calls a “far-off country.” He talks about how certain experiences trigger in us a desire for something that we can’t quite place our finger on.

Sometimes an experience—reading book... listening to a piece of music... a sunset hike in the Rockies... a human relationship... a memory of wintry Christmases past will seem to point beyond itself and will awaken something within us that we can't quite describe.

A word like “beauty” comes closest to describing what stands behind these experiences, but even this doesn't fully describe the hold that this far-off country has on us or the manner in which it draws us.

Listen to how Lewis puts it:

These things... are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. **For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.**¹

In the meantime, our experience is sometimes bittersweet. We live in this intermediate state between promise and fulfillment, between desire and consummation.

Between longing for home and arrival. Between the “wills” of God and the “hases” of Mary's song. Between Christ's comings.

But the crucial thing to remember, one of the deepest convictions of Christian faith, is that the desire points to something that is real. The longing for the far-off country has been created in us by God, so that we would, to use the language of Paul, speaking to the people of Athens in Acts 17:

seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Like Mary, we are “blessed if we believe” in this glorious hope. This is our “yes.”

May God help us to long appropriately for his comings. In Bethlehem and in glory.

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity, and the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 98-99.

He is indeed not far from any of us.

Amen.

