

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**Dec. 20, 2020 Streaming Mass**  
**Advent 4th Sunday of Year B Luke 1:26-38**

What is it that this teenage, unwed, mother-to-be, from a small town in rural Galilee, in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, can teach us, that we, with 2000 years of history and all our presumed sophistication, still have not been able to figure out? What can Mary, caught in the confusion caused by the angel's announcement, and beset by the fears that are understandably entailed in her future destiny, what can Mary teach us, with our fears and anxieties, about the ways in which we might engage life? The integrity of Mary's response is summed up in the words, "Let it be done to me according to your will." To do the will of God is the essential teaching of all the world's major religious traditions, but how do we know what God's will for us is?

The English poet, John Lovelace, wrote, "Iron bars do not a prison make, nor walls of steel a cage." I would suggest that this happens to us when very early in life we begin to construct our own prisons of the mind, of the soul, of the psyche. As mere children, we realize what a scary place this world we inhabit really is. We start to develop the coping skills, the survival skills, which we hope will get us through this dangerous place called life. The problem is that while those skills may work for a while, in time they become so mechanical, so reflexive, so automatic, so programmed, that they actually hinder us from engaging life as fully as we might.

Consider this metaphor. Have you ever gone to a circus-midway and seen a huge elephant tied to a small peg in the ground, held to it by only a small chain or rope? Why doesn't the elephant just pull the peg out the ground and run off? We say, "elephants never forget," but that doesn't mean that they can figure things out. As a baby elephant, it was chained to a small peg, when it was not strong enough to pull the chain out; it grew accustomed to being chained in this way. So, even when it grows up and is now much stronger, still it never tries to pull the peg from the ground. It has become used to being held by a small peg. It is the same with us in how, as small children, we learned to develop the skills that we, as adults, will go on to use in coping, in dealing with life. And those coping mechanisms can be like a chain or rope that keeps us stuck in one spot.

What Mary is doing by her response to the angel is no less than saying "yes" to life, saying "yes" without reservation. We are more accustomed to say, "yes, but." We are willing to engage life only to the degree that we expect to be shielded from its more dangerous aspects. Mary is able to say "yes" to life, with all of its pain and

possibility, with its joys and sorrows, because she believes at the very center of life is "God." We, on the other hand, may say we believe in God, but so much of our energy is spent in an effort to try to "play God," in an attempt to control events, people, feelings, emotions, in such a way that we presume we can protect ourselves from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

If we were to analyze matters further, we would see that for each of us there is one failing, one deficiency, one major character defect, that has become the pivot of our lives. It is our preferred mechanism or preferred coping skill against life's pain and hurt. We hope that using this approach to life in threatening situations will get us through, will save us, when, in fact, it enslaves us. Like the elephant, it chains us to a fixed spot in our lives, where in some sense we are stuck, we can't move. Those mechanical, reflexive, rigid, automatic ways of acting cut us off from other people, from God, and from ourselves. They are what we call the "seven deadly sins"—anger, pride, envy, avarice, gluttony, lust, sloth, and we could also add fear and deceit. These rigid patterns of behavior stem from our refusal to say "yes" to life in all its variety and wonder.

Again, Mary says, "Let it be done to me according to Your will." The charge is often leveled that the person who trusts in God's will is passive and does not act responsibly. Yet the exact opposite is true, because the individual who, like Mary, can say "yes" to life--because he or she trusts that at the very center of life is God the Creator and Sustainer of all things--that person is actually free to respond appropriately, and not rigidly and reflexively, to life's challenges. It is the person who is in the grip of their character defect, who is chained, who is stuck in one place, who acts inappropriately. Mary is the model of responsibility because she is "response-able," able to respond in the appropriate way to the variety of challenges life throws at her.

If we imitate Mary, we need do nothing but simply relax into life. We need do nothing but let go of our rigid way of responding to life, which to some degree is our basic sin, our basic character defect, our lack of trust in God. When the all too familiar pattern of response starts kicking in, just let it go, refuse to be controlled by it, and employ it only in those situations where it should be employed. Let go of the rigidity, relax into life, and life will teach us. Life will deliver its wisdom to us, if we are open to discover it. God's will for us is revealed as we depend less and less upon our past programmed responses, as we discover how mistaken, how inappropriate, how futile, were those efforts to control life, and simply let ourselves become aware of our total human experience, inside and outside, from moment to moment. The paradox is that what seems to be passivity is in fact a more responsible activity. We discover that we

are in control of nothing, although we may be in charge of many things, i.e., "response-able" to and for many things. And with this awareness we can begin to use all our facilities, our intellect, our emotions, our spontaneity, to meet life head-on--not as a threat, but as the gift of a loving God.

The poet Dante writes at the conclusion of the Divine Comedy that in the stars of heaven are written the words, "in His will is our peace." This is at the heart of today's Gospel. As we learn to say "yes" to life because we believe, because we trust, that at life's core is God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer, then in us, as in Mary, Christ can be born as well. Then we have dwelling within us the Holy One whose birth we celebrate this week.