

# **The Way of Love, Advent Sermons 2018**

**By**

**The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins**

# Say Yes

## **Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018**

*Readings:* Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 1:26-38

*Sermon text:* Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

She said yes.

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

What did it take for Mary to say yes? Faith, certainly. She had great faith in the God of her ancestors, Abraham Isaac and Jacob. She knew the stories of the old women miraculously given a child to bear: Sarah from Abraham, Hannah, and her own cousin Elizabeth, now six months pregnant.

Mary would visit Elizabeth soon and learn that she was not crazy but indeed blessed with a child from God. We will read that story next week.

But for now let’s go back to that day in early spring when an angel suddenly appeared in her room. The angel’s words were puzzling—how could she bear a child since she was a virgin still, though engaged to be married? And what would Joseph think? And why me? Why have I found special favor with God? How can I bear a child of the Most High, a king like David and more, the holy Son of God?

The angel simply reminded her, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

How could she disagree with that?

And so —so? just like that?—she said yes. Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.

Would you say yes in that situation? Or would you say, I think there has been some mistake. You have me confused with someone who is braver, more worthy, more free. Thank you for this amazing opportunity but I think I'll pass. Try my friend Sue—she is a big time believer.

But although later tradition backfills with stories of immaculate conception and extraordinary purity, we have no scriptural evidence to suggest that Mary was an exceptional young woman. I think all we can say with certainty given the story we have in Luke is that she trusted in God. And that trust was enough to overcome the doubt and fear and all the uncertainty, even of her own sanity, that that morning's conversation with Gabriel aroused.

She said yes.

Will you say yes now, if I ask you to walk this Advent in the Way of Love and take on a rule of life and try on some practices of a Jesus-centered life? Will you say even though if you embark seriously on this course of study and practice you will new life stirring within you? You will find your life both enriched and disturbed? You will even find your self transformed?

Okay, you have some questions first. Fair enough. So did Mary and it is only right to explain a bit more about what I am asking of you this morning and for the rest of Advent.

I invite you this morning to join me in undertaking an Advent course of study called the [Journeying the Way of Love: Practices for Jesus-Centered Life](#) that our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and his staff have prepared. (Learn more at [episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love](http://episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love)). It begins with learning about and doing some spirit and soul work through creating a personal rule of life.

A rule of life is a set of values and practices by which to live, a trellis to train our selves along so that we may flourish and bear fruit to the fullest extent possible. St Benedict of Nursia wrote the first "Rule" back in the sixth century as imperial Rome was crumbling—and organized a monastic community around the rule that would survive even to this day (Holy Cross Monastery across the river is a Benedictine order). Their rule was simple: do

three things regularly: work, pray and study (and of course also: rest). And accept three guiding values: obedience, stability and conversion of life.

Bishop Curry and his staff has adapted this idea of a rule of life into a set of seven practices that when woven into your life will lead to a deeper and more satisfying and more challenging journey of the spirit.

First, **turn**. Pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus.

Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. With God's help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice, and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice, and freedom. In turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again.

Second, **learn**. Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings.

By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life."

Third, **pray**. Dwell intentionally with God daily.

Jesus teaches us to come before God with humble hearts, boldly offering our thanksgivings and concerns to God or simply listening for God's voice in our lives and in the world. Whether in thought, word or deed, individually or corporately, when we pray we invite and dwell in God's loving presence.

Fourth, **worship**. Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God.

When we worship, we gather with others before God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love.

Think of these first four practices as the practices to orient yourself toward love of God: turn to God, learn from scripture and other teachers about the faith, learn to pray, join in a worshipping community.

Then put your faith into action in the world.

Fifth, **ble**ss. Share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

Jesus called his disciples to give, forgive, teach, and heal in his name. We are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions. We can share our stories of blessing and invite others to the Way of Love.

Sixth, **g**o. Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus.

As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with our lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world. We go to become Beloved Community, a people reconciled in love with God and one another.

Finally, **r**est. Receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and restoration.

From the beginning of creation, God has established the sacred pattern of going and returning, labor and rest. Especially today, God invites us to dedicate time for restoration and wholeness - within our bodies, minds, and souls, and within our communities and institutions. By resting we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.

The program offers specific doable suggestions for enhancing these practices in your life. Every morning this Advent you will receive in your email (if we have it) a recommended practice, along with Bible reading and question for reflection. For example, in the Advent calendar included in this program, today is a day to especially attend to worship (makes sense on a Sunday).

And the practice suggested for this first Sunday of Advent is to “pay attention during worship. What part of the gathering fills your heart?”

Try that. What part of worship today fills your heart? Pay attention to your heart. Notice that it yearns for new life. For connection to God and other people. To an end of isolation, depression, fear. To an end of saying no, I can't. To a new beginning of yes, a new birth of holy Spirit.

Here is to a new way, a new answer. Yes. Yes to God. Yes to new life. Yes to Jesus when he calls. Yes to all the better angels of our nature who sing together in a choir in our deep heart, saying yes, yes, yes.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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# Turn

## **Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018**

*Readings:* Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 1:39-56

*Sermon text:* I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

Advent two: the second candle has been lit, the time is at hand, “the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6) is near.

We think of the day of Jesus Christ as Christmas, the birth day of Jesus of Nazareth; December 25, as we traditionally reckon.

But it is a double day, past and future, the first coming of Jesus as a child born of Mary, in humility, recognized by few, and the second coming as Lord, in power and glory, the day of reckoning, when all will be judged.

The end and a new beginning.

Last week we talked about the visit of archangel Gabriel to the young Mary and her willingness to say yes to God. I asked if you were willing to say yes to God, specifically to take on the practices of the Way of Love spelled out by Bishop Michael Curry at General Convention. Turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. Seven practices for seven days—as helpfully put out in an Advent calendar available at the back and sent in an email Advent Reflection every morning to your inbox (if you have given us your email.) I hope you are finding them helpful. I hope your reaching out in prayer and practice to God is stirring up the spiritual water deep in your soul, I know that the Spirit will transform those who open themselves to her.

Just say yes.

And turn.

Turn to God. Turn to Jesus. Turn to the Way of Love. Turn to life.

And know you are not alone.

Mary must have wondered if she was crazy, had dreamed or imagined this whole encounter with Gabriel. Luke tells us that shortly after she went with haste to see her cousin Elizabeth, now six months pregnant, another miracle for one thought barren, another answer to prayer.

It took four days—Elizabeth did not live next door in Galilee but south in the hills of Judea. Mary must have travelled with someone—a young girl would not have that journey alone—but we are not told the details of the trip. Only what happened when Mary entered the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and said hello. It's me, Mary.

That must have been a surprise—no time for a message beforehand if she truly left with haste. No expectation that the young maid would make that length of trip. Just one day, one hour on the fourth day of travel, there she was. Hello. It's me.

Luke tells us that as soon as she heard Mary's voice, Elizabeth was “filled with the Holy Spirit” and the child in her womb, six months grown, leaped and kicked and said hello my cousin.

Jesus was not much more than a smidgen of cells at the time. But there was life, Elizabeth and John both felt it. And the Spirit informed Elizabeth that the child in the womb of Mary would be no less than the promised Messiah, the Lord.

And then, turn, Mary knew—she was not crazy, she was not alone, it was true, it was happening, the Lord had acted, Jesus was coming, the prophecies would be fulfilled. She was blessed among women and would be called blessed, and the Mighty One was acting, scattering the proud in the conceits of their hearts, toppling the rulers and lifting up the lowly. God was fulfilling the promise made to the ancestors. What was happening was not for her alone, not even for a few, but for all people, for Israel first and then the gentiles, for this place first, then for all places, for one time now and for all time in due time,

That end time is still coming. That promise—fulfilled in Jesus in part, will be fulfilled in full when he comes again in power and glory.

Meanwhile here we are, the second week of Advent, anno domini 2018...

Sixteen shopping days left. Better snap to it (memo to self). The Day is near.

What if you knew the Lord was coming again to judge the world in sixteen days. What would do to prepare?

Might be something to consider once in a while. It is going to take more than having your papers together and an emergency backpack in the car (memo to self: get papers together and check backpack).

You need to have your soul prepared. Memo to self. And a word to the wise.

You need to turn, my beloved friends. Turn and turn again, as the old song has it .

"Simple Gifts" was written in 1848 by Elder Joseph while he was at the Shaker community in Alfred, Maine. These are the lyrics to his one-verse song:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Yes, it is a dance song. Nothing wrong with that according to the old Shakers (but nothing beyond that!).

So turn literally, bow and bend, kneel to pray and stand to sing, open your hands to receive the gifts of Holy Communion, open your ears to hear the Word of God, and turn your face to God. Turn to the Way of Love.

That's the right way to face. When we turn to self, when our thoughts are all about what's in it for me, we turn from God and neighbor. and we always do turn to self. It's natural, our default mode. But Jesus, and many other spiritual teachers, tell us that the self we have as it were by nature is not the truest and deepest and highest self, but a self built for survival and competition. A self that craves admiration from others and seeks love for itself. A captive self, a false self. Not a self that craves truth from above and gives love to God and others, a self turned outward, a self that is by that very turning free and simple and back in the garden where we ought to be.

Let's turn turn till we come 'round right.

Keep turning my friends, keep turning to Jesus, keep turning to God.

And if and when that awesome Day comes, you will not be filled with dread but with the Holy Spirit of courage and hope. You will be ready to rejoice with Elizabeth, Mary and all the saints who have waited for this Day.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come.

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## **Name This Child**

### **Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018**

*Readings:* Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 1:57-80; Cantic 9

*Sermon text:* On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Luke 1:59-64

It is said of the Vilna Gaon, the great 18th century Lithuanian rabbi and scholar of the Torah, Talmud, Mishnah and Kabbalah, student of all sciences, master of the golem, that one night he had a dream.

In the dream he found himself in heaven, confronted by an angel who held open before him the Book of Life.

What is your name, the angel asked. ELIJAH BEN SOLOMON ZALMAN, known as the Vilna Gaon (which mean genius), scholar and inventor of the golem (a sort of man-made human creation).

Let me see, said the angel. He looked in the Book of Life. Nothing under the name ELIJAH BEN SOLOMON ZALMAN, he said, and nothing here about the Vilna Gaon or the great master of the golem and sage of all learning. Sorry.

Now you see if your name is not written in the Book of Life that means your name has been erased, that your life is as if it never was.

That cannot be, exclaimed the great rabbi.

Let me check again. Nope. Not here. But let me ask you a question. Is there another name, a name you have that only God knows? What is the name that

God calls you by? You can go over there and think. Maybe you will remember.

The Vilna Gaon woke with a start. He was drenched with sweat and shaking. He knew that whatever else he did with his life only one thing counted. he must learn, or remember the name God calls him by.

What is the name God calls you by?

There is an intriguing verse (2:17) in that very mysterious book, Revelation, that reads, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

This also echoes Isaiah 62:2: Nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory. You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

Names are important.

In our story this morning from Luke, Zechariah, a temple priest, learned in a dream that he and his wife Elizabeth would bear a child—though both were getting along in years—and the child was to be named John. This was the direct order of the angel.

Zechariah asked one too many questions about how this was possible, given that both he and his wife were getting along in year. The angel Gabriel silenced him—literally struck him mute. He couldn't speak for the next nine or so months. Good thing he could write notes to Elizabeth. because when the time came—when the baby was delivered and eight days later when it was time for him to be circumcised and named, she said name him John. Well, actually the Hebrew name Yochannah, in Greek Johannes, in English John. Means God is gracious. Good name, just not one that was in the family had it before—which was the custom then and now among jews when naming their children—though not, as Luke has, after the father but those already deceased, such as grandfathers. Anyway, people questioned her choice and

looked to Zechariah as the father and patriarch to decide. Back in the day, it was patriarchy straight up no chaser. But he wrote—like she said, John. So John it was. And immediately he was able to speak and delivered the great song we read as our canticle. Or so anyway Luke puts a great song in his mouth. Both he and Mary get wonderful songs of praise to God and prophesy of the deliverance of Israel and the coming of the Lord.

John's role in life was to prepare the way for the one to come—which he did perfectly, including baptizing our Lord.

the angel Gabriel had no trouble finding his name in the book of life, since after all he gave him the name in the first place.

Name this child, I ask the parents when then hand me the child to be baptized. Don't want to get it wrong. In a way, the name we receive in baptism is the name God gives us—only not a secret anymore. And we seal the baptism with the sign of the cross in oil on the forehead—a sign that the person is Christ's own forever. That's a sign and claim that can't be washed off, can't be lost. God will always be able to see that sign—yep, one of my children, come right in.

won't matter what you did or did not do in this life. That will be judged but it won't be the reason your name is in the book of life. Your name is in the book of life because God loves you and calls you by name. Your mine. Do not fear. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ—not heights nor depth, not power or rulers—nothing and nowhere. You are called by name.



But it is helpful to realize that. To know, really know in your bones and heart, that you are loved by God. It helps if your mother and father love you well, so you know deep abiding unconditional human love. Love that remains even if the human souls grow apart. Because that happens to us and God too. We drift apart (that's usually on us, God remains faithful, but can be very hard to see and feel sometimes). But the love is like the bonds of paired quantum particles who can be incredible distances apart yet at the same time—and how is a mystery still—behave as if joined.

And it is helpful to know what God calls you to do. Which is usually some form of love in action. Work that makes a difference, words that heal, gestures that invite friendship in return. It is more important to have the love part down than the particulars about your calling—just whatever you do, do it with love. Even fighting your enemies.

And make no mistake, there is challenge and strife in this world—because so many live in darkness, as if they didn't realize they are called by name to love.

But you won't make that mistake. You know better than to live in the darkness, in fear and anger and loneliness and sadness. You know that it is time to wake up. To live in the light as children of light.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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