

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
August 15, 2004

## **“Vocation and the Art of Saying Yes”**

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

August is peak wedding month here in this beautiful chapel. I was thinking this morning about the number of weddings I’ve done over the past 3 weekends. This afternoon will make 12. It’s all been wonderful however, with only a few near meltdowns. Lots of happiness, some tears, nerves, plenty of vows and promises.

Coincidentally, I heard a story recently about a couple that modified their vows. Instead of the traditional promise to “love and to cherish until we are parted by death,” theirs read: “to love and to cherish...not only through this lifetime but after death, through all eternity.” Before exchanging these vows the groom was a bit reticent and bewildered apparently and said:

“I thought this was over at death. I guess I had a different plan for eternity. I thought I’d be single.”

Despite what you might believe about life or the afterlife and to put all levity aside --- how we imagine our lives to be or not to be is a significant part of our human condition. Most of us who work, teach and learn on this campus are quite familiar with that vexing question: “What should I do with my life?” It is indeed heard regularly from students that my colleagues and I encounter.

But speaking of different plans, imagining the shape of our lives or vexing questions, this is where the key figure of our text from the gospel of Luke comes in. Mary. Yes, you heard that right, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The mother of God.

We might be surprised to hear about Mary in the middle of August. But we do because August 15 is designated as a holy day in honor of her. The season of Christmas is still four months away, which is when many in Protestant traditions particularly have grown

accustomed to hearing about her place in the history of Christendom. I’m often perplexed by how little we talk about Mary. And quite frankly, when we do speak of her (or debate) the concentration is on a virgin birth, which narrows our focus to a very small facet of Mary’s life. This concentration, regardless of what you might believe about a virgin birth, delimits the role of Mary to a biological one alone and ignores the other messages of her life and presence.

This first century Jewish woman named Miriam of Nazareth, mother of Jesus, also proclaimed in faith to be Theokotos, meaning the God-bearer, is considered the most significant female religious figure in the Christian tradition. One of my favorite religious scholars, Elizabeth A. Johnson asks:

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What would be a theologically sound, ecumenically fruitful, spiritually empowering, ethically challenging and socially liberating interpretation of Mary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How in particular can her image be construed so as to be a source of blessing rather than blight for women's lives in both religious and political terms? Can the fullness of the vision of God, the totality of that message, possibly be achieved without the agency of women?

Before I go any further, I will say that the figure of Mary referred to by these questions is extraordinarily complex. (Which also means I won't be answering all of these questions in the next 12 minutes) She has been interpreted and explained, imagined and rejected, loved and honored in ways so diverse as to be impossible to codify. That diversity begins in Holy Scripture, where each of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) portrays Mary in a different way. The one we just heard from Luke is generally a positive, personallistic view of the Holy Mother as full of grace and favor with God, a woman who cooperated with the divine adventure of bringing the Redeemer into human flesh. She said yes. "Let it be with me according to your word." Luke's gospel also contains the longest speech Mary ever makes. It is a song, known through the centuries

as the Magnificat and it is about her understanding of what saying yes would mean to the world and to the future.

And I'm going to suggest it is also about vocation.

Now that might seem a little odd in the middle of August when we might be pondering, past or present - vacation rather than vocation. But no matter when or where we are or who we are, the vexing 'what should I do with my life' question is a penetrating and one that bears no preference necessarily to age, gender, status, socioeconomics, station in life or intelligence.

And what is vocation really? It is not simply about a job or a skill, despite the connotation of vocational training. A vocation is both a call and response, and for each of us it is a life's work. For some, it can literally mean a call from God not simply to do but to be, and not just to be anything but to be what it is that perhaps God has in mind for us to be. A vocation is that calling to which the habits of the heart conform. To say yes or to say no.

Which is precisely where we might gain some significant insight from Mary. In the verses preceding what we heard today, according to the story recorded in Luke, Mary listened as an angel gave her the barest details about what was to come to pass and then it was her turn to speak. While it sounds like there was no question it was going to happen, she still had a choice – whether to take hold of the unknown life held out to her or whether to defend herself against it however she could. As far as we know, Mary was the only person in the world with this particular decision to make – that is consented to carry, give birth to, nurse and raise the son of God.

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There is much talk today about all of the choices we have, and about how it is up to each of us to choose our own lives. But we also know these choices often choose us. The economy, a sudden and serious illness, surprise babies, aging parents, a destructive force of nature, a war. Our best-laid plans are interrupted by life's plans for us. Hard things happen and wonderful things happen, but seldom do we know ahead of time exactly what will happen to us.

Even so, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes I will live this life that is being held out to me or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events or no, I will not. If you say no, you can go with what is most familiar and pretend that nothing happened. If your life begins to change anyway, you have options. You can refuse to accept it, put all of your energy into ignoring it and insist it is not happening to you. You can try to get your life back the way it used to be. Believe me, I know. I've done it.

Or, you can decide to say yes. You can be a test pilot, a risk taker. You can set your book down and listen to a strange idea. You can decide to take part in a plan you did not choose; doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you do not entirely understand. You can take part in something with no script and no guarantees. Believe me I know. I've done that too. I would not be here in this pulpit today otherwise.

In his book Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose; Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition, Brian Mahan, a layperson that teaches at Emory University's School of Theology writes:

“Vocation speaks of a life that is “unscripted” in a sense. By contrast, ambition seems scripted by its very essence (If you get accepted to Yale Law School, then you go to Yale Law School). In ambition, the prestige of the achievement often seems to depend more on the dignity of the role itself than on the dignity of the one who fills it. Vocation speaks of a gracious discovery of a kind of interior consonance between our deepest desires and hopes and our unique gifts, as they are summoned forth by the needs of others and realized in response to that summons.”

Does this mean that one cannot be a lawyer, doctor or investment banker? That we all have to be starving artists, environmentalists, teachers, or clergy? No. But Mahan and

others think there is more to this than meets the eye. When it comes right down to it, who really likes the idea of living a scripted life? There are few of us who don't now and again yearn for a different kind of life and wonder what we should do about it. But there is, if truth were told, a palpable resistance to the concept of vocation, to even the possibility of embracing a different kind of life. It just feels too risky or too idealistic. It might even make us cynical or indifferent.

Let's think about this for a minute. Consider where we are. Stanford University. Silicon Valley. There are lots of ambitious students and people around here. Not to mention extraordinarily gifted, smart and motivated. Societal expectations and conformist

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pressures are evident in a place like this. What are you going to do with that Stanford degree? We're spending lots of money for your education and you haven't figured out a major? In other words, life conceived as vocation – increasingly given over to compassion for self, others, and world – as our illustration of Mary would suggest – one more Theokotos, willing to bear God into the world – seems beside the point, or a bad bet in such circumstances.

Not necessarily. As recent as last week, I was sitting in a discussion with 3 students who are spending their summer in a Spirituality and Service fellowship, working in the local community with various non-profit agencies that serve the homeless and low income families and advocate for affordable housing. The discussion centered squarely on the struggles they are encountering in selecting a major. They are wistful about choosing a meaningful path for their lives. They seem inspired but don't know what to do about it. Their experiences this summer are reminding them about something they already know and carry within themselves. What Brian Mahan calls a "shadow government of compassion and idealism."

What I believe, both with Mahan's help and by directly observing these students, is that most of us wish nothing more than to "liberate our shadow government from exile and to incarnate in the routines of work and play and worship the deepest longings of our heart."

But our inhibitions hold us back and our longings in captivity remain strong. We need to be better acquainted with them, flush them out of their hiding place, study them in detail and display them for what they truly are.

And I would venture to say that these students have in their own peers (and parents) what are called friendly adversaries. Voices who might suggest they need to consider choosing a major so that they can earn a living, or make "good money." That their compassion, idealism and intensity need to be tempered a bit. They can't change course or direction now. I would imagine that we all have people like that in our lives.

Without wanting to seem naïve, this is precisely why the story of Mary and its connection to vocation gave me no alternative but to study it in more detail and flush it out of its hiding place. As it has been said, we have an advantage over Mary for we have her example before us. Hearing what might be said to us, what would we do? Would we dare respond to the call as we heard it, as it came to us, as it challenged and changed us? Opportunity and responsibility conspired for Mary and she answered. A few questions were asked, but she took her opportunity and accepted her responsibility.

I suspect that you would agree that there are plenty of opportunities for us in all sorts of places and under numerous conditions. And yet, vocation is an elusive word. But, I read a definition of vocation recently that probably sums it up much better than all the rest. It should in no way be confused with having only relevance to a clergy profession such as mine either. "Vocation" says writer Frederick Buechner, "is where your great joy meets the world's great need."

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It might be that our calling, our life's work, our vocation is to spend our life endeavoring to put that joy and need together. Unlike Mary, we don't have the purported luxury of an angel appearing for example to tell us what to do. (Or as I heard it put: I envy the Blessed Virgin Mary, for at least somebody told her what to do and she did it; she had a job for life.") It is not quite the same for us, but we do have the holy and fulfilling

vocations set before us from the stories of our religious traditions and the lively encounters of our unique experiences to help us. They deserve our attention and reflection.

When it comes right down to it, no matter who we are, what we do, whether we are vocationally clear or not, we are reminded that in a sense, we are all "mothers of God" as the medieval mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart said. "What good is it to me, he wrote, "if this eternal birth of the divine takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to the Christ if I do not also give birth to that in my time and culture? This then is the fullness of time: when God is begotten in us."

My hope and prayer for each of us is that following the example of this blessed woman Mary, our great joy may meet the world's great need beginning here and now with a resounding yes. Amen.