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**Title:** Respond to the Light

**Date:** December 22 & 23, 2018

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**Scripture:** [Luke 1:26-38](#)

**Text:** [Luke 1:39-56](#)

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The season is almost over. Not Christmas. Advent. There are just two days left, today and tomorrow and then Christmas, a season that is twelve days long. Most of you don't do Christmas just for 12 days even though you know that's the way the carol goes. We do Christmas from Thanksgiving to a few days after Christmas Day. But as we

started this season of Advent, we acknowledged that there are a lot of things that we do, traditions that we hold dear, ways of celebrating that we hold onto, that have little to do with the birth of Jesus and a lot to do with old ways of celebrating the winter solstice.

Thankfully, that is over. Did you celebrate? The solstice was at 5:23 p.m. on Friday and I am ecstatic. Friday was the darkest day of the year in 2018 in the Northern Hemisphere. As someone who loves the light, I always celebrate. From now until June, we gain more light every day and let's face it, we need more light.

We need Christmas light. Christmas comes as a light that shines in the darkness. Isaiah promised the light as if it had already happened. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2) We've been to Bethlehem many times and have seen the light radiating from the newborn Savior's face. The memory of that light focused our Advent attention and offers hope that we will experience it again.

We need that light to shine on us again because we don't have the capacity to shine on our own. Like celestial objects that depend upon the sun's light to shine in the heavens, to have an albedo, we require the Son's light to shine on us. It is the only way to be the "... light of the world.... let your light shine before others." (Matthew 5:14a,15b) Joseph was the first to reflect that light of Jesus. But he wasn't the first to respond to the light. That

distinction is held by Mary. Her story challenges us in these last few days before Christmas. She teaches us how to respond.

Before we get to Mary's inspiring story, let me place it within the context of first century Palestine. It was a time of high Messianic expectation, a longing for the promised light of Isaiah. a hope that it would shine into the darkness of their occupied country. Pax Romana came at a terrible price of oppression and heavy taxation. It was particularly hard on the poor. The longing heard, in the market, at the city gates, in the synagogue. It always began the same way. "When the Messiah comes..." and then, fill in the blank. When the Messiah comes, we will act justly. Justice will prevail when the Messiah comes. When the Messiah comes, we will care for the poor because the Messiah will care for the poor. When the Messiah comes, there will be peace so we will be peacemakers. When the Messiah comes, we will be righteous. We will deal with each other fairly. It wasn't just a matter of anticipating what would happen when a Messiah came; it was also acknowledging that their behavior would also change.<sup>1</sup>

It is only human to think this way. We all have a bucket list of things that we will do or finish or be sometime in the future. You have yours, I have mine. One day, I'm going to... fill in the blank. But the problem with this kind of thinking is you can spend your whole life waiting for something. But when that something finally arrives, you aren't sure you want it.

Preaching and New Testament scholar Fred Craddock once pointed this out when he said, "It is easier to believe in a Messiah that is coming than a Messiah that has come." Let me say that again. "It is easier to believe in a Messiah that is coming than a Messiah that has come." If the Messiah has come, it forces you into doing something, it forces you to respond. If you respond, you have to change. But when it comes right down to it, most of us don't want to change.<sup>2</sup>

It is what is so remarkable about Mary. She responded and she changed. Scripture gives testimony to this. It starts with the response. You heard the story. Gabriel shows up and says, "Hey, Mary. 'When' is over. The Messiah is coming. Right now, right here. It's happening. It's not something a year from now. It's not something a decade from now. It's not in the next century. It's happening now. Gabriel comes and makes a declarative statement that the game is on, that it is finally happening. When becomes will. Have you ever noticed this? Count them, count the wills, count them out loud when I say them.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you **will** conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you **will** name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom, there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33) How many "wills?" Seven.

Mary is hesitant. Can you blame her? That's a lot to place on anyone. She wants to know some detail. There is a lot not being explained, like the part about being pregnant. How can this be? The angel comes back at her. What's the will count? There are more. "The angel said to her, "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" (Luke 1:35) Now how many? Eleven. Odd numbers.

It's an announcement, a declaration that it will happen. When has become will. And the angel says, "And you know your cousin Elizabeth, who everybody thought was barren, has been pregnant now for six months. If God can do that, God can do this. "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:36) This is going to happen. It will. How does Mary respond to will? She says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) <sup>3</sup> How many tribes of Israel were there? Twelve. How many disciples? Twelve. How many "wills." Twelve, God's perfect number for God's will.

She could have run away. She could have said, "I'm busy." She could have said, "Find someone more qualified." She could have said, "I'm too young, or I'm not ready." You know all of those excuses. Maybe you've used them. But instead, she responds, "Yes, count me in. Right here, I believe in your words, your wills and I am the servant of the Lord. She believes the message of God. If you believe in God's will, your life is going to change.

That is what's so impressive about Mary. The angel says, "Everything everybody has hoped for, what you've heard people say all their lives that they wanted, their hopes and dreams of "when the Messiah comes" is happening right now and God has chosen you to make it happen. And Mary says, "Then let's do it. I believe in will. I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be."

Over the centuries, the church has talked about Mary as obedient. They've dressed her in a Carolina blue robe, exuding piety from a somber face, often holding her baby son in her arms, barely making eye contact as if the assignment was thrust upon her and she could do nothing but obey. I do not think that accurately portrays Mary's volitional act, her own declarative statement. Nor does it reflect her subsequent action. Mary is anything but passively obedient in her response.

Luke tells us what that response looks like. She immediately hurried down to the home of her older relative Elizabeth to share the Good News. The moment Mary crosses the threshold, she starts singing like a Broadway musical. It starts out well and good. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (Luke 1:46-47) Mary rejoices over what Gabriel told her and what Elizabeth confirmed. Her son is the Son of David, the Messiah, and future king. She's happy that she will be a mother, happy that God "... looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:48b) It's a genuine celebration of being asked and responding to the light with "Yes, let it be.

But her next words move her beyond response to change and the change she sings about is dangerous and subversive. Maybe you never thought of it that way but listen to the change that she sings about. Put this song within the context of a King Herod, who was so crazy that he had his own family members' assassinated for anything that smelled of treason.

Mary sings. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:51-53) What happened to will? It turned into has. This is happening. What is happening? When Mary announced that God "has brought down the powerful rulers from their thrones," anyone within earshot knew what that meant for Herod the Great, if not Rome. And when she sang that God has sent the rich away empty, she was pointing her finger directly at Herod whose insatiable appetite for opulent palaces broke the back of the Palestinian peasants. You may not like politics in church but Mary is singing a dangerous and subversive political song. She knew the identity of her son and she understood the only way to respond was to tell his story. She took the terms Gabriel gave her—Son of God, Savior, and Messiah and began to interpret who he was and what he was to do.<sup>4</sup> And it wasn't just a one-time response.

She responded, changed and became the most faithful disciple in the New Testament. She was the only person to respond to the coming light of Jesus before he was born. She raised him with that in mind, knowing that he was Son of God, Savior, and Messiah. She saw him leave home and knew what was coming. She understood what happens to someone who talks like the Messiah. It can cause a crisis in peoples lives. It happened in their own home synagogue in Nazareth. Someday had arrived and people didn't like it because if the Messiah comes, you have to act differently, you have to change. Mary sees this, understand this, and believes this all of the way to

the cross where she saw her son die. She was there when they took his body down, there when they laid him in a tomb, and there when he ascended into heaven. She was there because of saying “Yes, Here I am the servant of the Lord.” Mary responded to the light and she is now considered to be one of the first disciples of the early church. And, she was right; every generation since has called her blessed.

I wonder what might happen if we could all be like Mary; if we could respond to the light the way she did? What if we all lived that way, if we didn’t live: one day maybe, one day I'm going to, or when this happens, when the kids get older, or when I retire? What if we were to live not as when, but will and has? Not believing that the Messiah will come someday, but trusting that the king has come and the world has already changed. Would it make a difference?

You know it would. People around you would experience justice because you would act justly. You would care for the poor and fill the hungry with good things. There would be peace because we would all be peacemakers. We'd deal fairly and honestly with each other because we will be righteous. It could happen and you would make a difference but you have to respond to the light. You have to say, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.”

You may feel like that’s a lot to ask but is it any more than Gabriel’s request of Mary? No. But I promise that if you respond to the light that like Mary, it will make your soul and spirit rejoice. It might even make you sing a song about being blessed.

Oh Lord Jesus, come quickly that we, like Mary, might respond to your Christmas light.

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<sup>1</sup> Pilgrim, W. E. (1989) ‘Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ’, *Interpretation*, 43(3), p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> Berlin, Tom. Chasing the Light. 12/18/16. <https://www.florisumc.org>

<sup>3</sup> Berlin, Tom. Chasing the Light

<sup>4</sup> McKnight, S. (2006) ‘The Mary we never knew: why the mother of Jesus was more revolutionary than we have been led to believe’, *Christianity Today*, 50(12), pp. 26–30