

W Thomas – The Third Sunday of Advent - Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC – 12-14-25

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. For God invites us to live and love like Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, help others to do the same.

I am dressed this way to match a candle.

We have a pink, violet, I don't know, candle lit for today, and it is in tradition of the church going back before the current lectionary when this would be a Mary day. We would celebrate the Virgin Mary very much this day. And I am very grateful that we can sneak in the Magnificat, that great statement of faith that Mary makes upon seeing her cousin Elizabeth, who is now carrying that which is John the Baptist.



This is after Mary has said yes to the angel Gabriel. And so, having given you that premise, let me say this, and then continue on. This sermon rejoices that Mary said yes to be the mother of Jesus, and explores how prayer prepares us to say yes to God's holy invitations, and how prayer strengthens us to live into that yes.

And Mary is an absolute wonderful person to see as an example of entering into the premise I say to you. When she begins her statement to Elizabeth, she says, My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Now there's a couple of interesting parts as we enter into Mary, something you may not have considered before. It's a theological premise. How many women do you think the angel Gabriel visited before he came upon Mary who said yes? It's a theological premise.

Some Christians might have trouble with it, but it's a theological premise that I think gives all the more power to my interpretation of Mary's willingness to say yes, and I sense a young woman who was already deeply committed to prayer so that she could be open to receiving this holy invitation. And upon receiving

it, she gave us the gift of saying yes. Sometimes it's very hard to say yes when God says, would you like to do something that's a little out of your comfort zone, and then you get to be surprised.

I said yes, I'll come to Elizabeth City, which meant having the hardship of saying goodbye to my wife on Saturdays and then driving back on Wednesdays, if you will. But then the joy of what I found here and the gifts that I have received here have been profound. So, how do you find your way into the prayer that supports you? I will posit this, using Amy Grant, that wonderful Christian and now pop singer, but a woman of deep faith in her own right, I really want to sing verses from *Breath of Heaven*.

I'm also not quite sure how the copyright works with YouTube, so I'm going to read a couple of verses from it, and on my website I'll post a link so you can actually hear Amy Grant sing it. But she posits an amazing question that goes to the heart of what it means to be able to have prayer that strengthens us to live into that yes, and that's to acknowledge the need to pray, the need for the relationship with God that gives you the strength to see the days to come, even if they seem dark. The days to come will have God's presence in them.

One of the reasons I think we light these candles at Advent, to remind us that the light of Christ cannot be overcome by the darkness. And so, as Amy Grant writes this song that begins in Mary's voice,

I have traveled many moonless night, cold and weary with a babe inside, and I wonder what I have done, Holy Father. You have come and chosen me now to carry your Son.

I am waiting in a silent prayer. I am frightened by the load I bear. In a world as cold as stone, must I walk this path alone? Be with me now, be with me now.

And then she goes, *Breath of Heaven, light up my darkness. Pour over me your holiness, for you are holy.*

And then she posits the question that I wonder how Mary must have struggled with it.

Remember, she is writing, Amy Grant as if she is Mary's voice. And this is a question I think we all might struggle with when God has offered us an invitation and we've struggled as best we can to accept it and live into it.

Breath of Heaven, do you wonder as you watch my face if a wiser one should have had my place? But I offer all that I am for the mercy of your plan.

Help me be strong, help me be, help me.

I think in that one little verse, Amy Grant speaks to why when Mary said yes, joy and rejoicing was perhaps the norm in heaven if we want to let our imaginations go to that point. Because she understood her total need to be in relationship with God to handle something so huge.

And I wonder what prayer Mary may have said over and over and over again that helped her be strong. And I have to think it just might have been the first prayer. The one that began as we prayed with her just a few minutes ago.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

And the prayer continues on as you know. I wonder if she kept praying that over and over again. And I wonder as we have this particular day, this particular moment when we rejoice that she said yes and we can find places where we can rejoice as well and be a light in the darkness.

I wonder if you have a prayer that guides you. You have heard me speak a number of times of the prayers that helped me. And I'm going to just leave you with the one that seems to keep bubbling up over and over and over again.

The one for the prayer of self-discipline.

Almighty and eternal God, so draw my heart to you, so guide my mind, so fill my imagination that I may be wholly yours. Utterly dedicated to you. And use me I pray as you will and always to your glory and the welfare of your people. This I pray in and through the strength of Jesus Christ.

And I also have a small thank you prayer which has different words from time to time.

But it seems to bubble up when I need it most. When I bump into fellow travelers on the way who have given me that moment of rejoice by their willingness to remind me how much they need Jesus and how they love to share Jesus. And I've got to tell you; I rejoice that I have found that fear and I take that light of Christ with me.

Yes, I believe Mary took her burden with her, but it was never truly a burden. It turned out to be a joy even in the pain that she may have endured at the end, for she knew the gift she was giving all. And for that, we rejoice that Mary said, yes.

All these words I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.