

Learning from Mary during a pandemic

How do we say yes to the call of this moment?

by [L. Roger Owens](#)

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Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 1898

Last week I felt paralyzed. I managed some necessities like figuring out how to move my seminary courses online, joining a Zoom meeting, and enduring a three-hour family game of Trivial Pursuit. I even showered and shaved each day.

But between distractions, I couldn't keep the enormity of the disaster we are all facing at bay. Along with afraid, I felt useless.

I read reports of the heroic efforts of health care workers and others laboring on the front lines. I gave thanks in my pajamas for sanitation workers as I heard the trash truck rumble through our neighborhood one morning.

These people were doing something that mattered; I felt stuck.

By the end of the week, I found myself praying, almost begging, “What is my vocation *now*? What is this moment asking of *me*?”

On the day when an angel appeared to Mary, a day Christians observe today as the Feast of the Annunciation, the angel announced what that historical moment was asking of her. What *God* was asking of her.

Under the enormity of the disaster that was Roman occupation and the universal disaster of human sinfulness, a new call showed up. And Mary found within herself the courage to offer a profound yes to that call: “Let it be with me according to your word.”

We often think of vocation as that consistent arc of passion that shapes the way we offer ourselves to God and to the world over the long haul. We think of people like Dorothy Day and the consistency of her commitment to live peacefully and serve the poor; like Martin Luther King Jr. and his enduring commitment to secure justice for the marginalized; like Fred Rogers and the call to help children voice and manage their feelings that shaped all that he did.

Vocation, we think, answers the question, what am I supposed to do with my life?

But angels also appear to us in the form of the exigencies of the moment. And these for-such-a-time-as-this moments ask us to imagine how the arc of our vocations might shift, adapt, and respond to circumstances that just months ago we couldn't have imagined.

Quakers call this discerning a *concern*. For Quakers, a concern can give meaning and purpose to one's whole life, like John Woolman's lifelong call to resist slavery. But a concern can also be for a more limited time, responding to the needs of the current hour in history.

All things are possible with God, the angel told Mary. And that must include our own responding with a yes to the divine summons of this moment, to the holy call these days are offering us.

I've seen people doing this.

I've watched pastors who weeks ago would have found worship over Facebook theologically problematic and technologically flummoxing now exploiting technology to keep their faith communities worshipping together and feeling connected—their yes to the call of the moment.

A neighbor down the street from me is collecting food on her front porch to deliver every Thursday to people who now can't afford to buy food or for whom it would be too risky to venture out. As my daughter and I walked to her house last week with two small bags of food culled from our basement stash, I considered this woman's faithful yes to the needs of the moment.

Last Thursday I sat on my back patio, a prayer shawl on my lap and a cup of coffee in my hand, and chatted over the phone with my spiritual director. When she began our conversation with the question, "How are you praying these days with all that's going on?" and tears began to tumble down my cheeks for the first time in the midst of this crisis, I knew that she was answering the call of her vocation in this time. She was offering her own profound yes to this moment by doing what she does best.

And maybe it's even becoming more clear to me. After my begging prayer, over the weekend I began to sense an answer: *get words on the page*.

In good Mary-fashion, I pondered and questioned. *But everybody has something to say. What could I possibly add? And I hardly have room to think, let alone write.*

But the summons persisted, and I began to relent—and to write.

God "speaks within you and me," writes Quaker mystic Thomas R. Kelly in his classic *A Testament of Devotion*:

to our truest selves, in our truest moments, and disquiets us with the world's needs. By inner persuasions God draws us to a few very definite tasks, *our* tasks, God's burdened heart particularizing his burdens in us.

In other words, through the world's needs—our community's needs, our neighbor's needs, our family's needs—an angel shows up and invites.

And through our yes, God's own burdened heart of love takes flesh in the world once again.