

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination 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. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Behold the Handmaiden - December 18, 2022

Luke 1:39-55

One of the most overlooked characters in the Christmas story is, ironically, one of the most important. Without Mary, the baby Jesus could not have been born. Yet, when we listen to our Christmas songs, Mary is barely mentioned. She is only referred to indirectly in her role as mother. Sadly, we tend to treat her as merely the passive recipient of the Holy Spirit. After all, if the Son of God were to appear in human form, somebody had to give birth to him. Would not any girl do?

Well, the answer is yes. We know from scripture and from our own experience that God can take the most unlikely people and use them for God's purposes. Does that mean, however, that Mary is just God's puppet? Our Roman Catholic friends tend to place a great emphasis on the role of Mary. We Protestants respond by shutting her out almost completely. Perhaps a true understanding as to the role of Mary in the Christmas story can be found somewhere between. On this Sunday before Christmas, let us take some time to see what kind of woman God chose to be the earthly mother of God's only begotten son.

Luke's account does not tell us very much about Mary. We learn that she was a virgin, she lived in a small town called Nazareth, and she was engaged to a man named Joseph. We know that Joseph was a descendant of King David. We are also told that Mary had found "favor with God." In such a brief outline, we hear nothing that particularly qualifies Mary for the special task God has assigned to her. Luke's thumbnail description could apply to any one of hundreds of girls.

However, after this all too brief introduction to Mary, the angel Gabriel encounters her and we learn a bit more about who this woman really is. I say "woman" because only a mature woman could speak as she did to a representative of God almighty.

Depictions on "It's a Wonderful Life" aside, having a direct experience of encountering God must be an overwhelming experience. Mary deserves credit simply for not running away. Indeed, Luke describes Mary's reaction as not one of fear but of confusion. She was "perplexed." In many ways, perplexity or confusion is not a bad attitude to hold toward God. Far too often, we shut God out of lives, either ignoring or pretending to ignore God's will. Alternately, others think they have God all figured out, knowing what God wants at all times. Indeed, the Christian life is a constant search and struggle to discern God's will. Repeatedly, I find the greatest source of unhappiness in people lies in the fact that we refuse to allow God to touch and change our lives. As the circumstances of our lives alter, from good to bad and back to good, God seeks nothing more than to work with us to help us make the most of our situations. Naturally, the process of discerning the will of God can

leave us in a state of confusion at times. Yet, by confessing her confusion, Mary was also stating her willingness to listen to God and consider God's new plan for her life.

Mary also was blessed with having a firm grasp of reality. Nevertheless, she possessed a faith that was open to hearing God's interpretation of reality -- an interpretation that is not always the same as ours. She dared challenge the angel. She asked how she could bear a child when she was a virgin. Note that the angel did not criticize Mary for asking her question. In fact, the angel's reply indicates that her question was very reasonable. Gabriel tells her, "Nothing is impossible with God."

The Christian life does not deny the reality of our senses and knowledge. Nevertheless, we stake our faith on the simultaneous existence of an alternative reality. In other words, we risk believing in things unseen as well as things seen. Naturally, if we had an experience similar to Mary's, we might be quick to accept whatever the angel Gabriel told us. Seldom, of course, do such experiences take place in our lives. However, to believe in God means we sometimes find ourselves having to choose between the evidence of our senses and a faith that occasionally defies our senses. Mary's choice -- her response to Gabriel -- stands as the only response we can make in faith: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. By the time of Jesus' crucifixion, Mary learns that that everything the angel told her about him was indeed true. However, in the various Gospel accounts, it is clear that she did not fully grasp who her son was during his childhood and later ministry. Naturally, the predictions of Gabriel made no sense to her at the time. Therefore, Mary had to make sense of her strange pregnancy with the only tool she had: her faith.

There are various cultural interpretations of Mary's dilemma. Some say that because she was only engaged to Joseph and not married to him she can be portrayed as an unwed mother. Other scholars claim that once an engagement was announced it was perfectly natural for couples to begin their families. One thing, however, was certain. Joseph knew Mary's baby was not his. Obviously, Joseph accepted his future wife's condition and agreed to raise her son. However, it is equally obvious that with or without Joseph, Mary was determined to go ahead. Mary's great gift to us, besides the Christ-child, was an ability to deal realistically with the present while maintaining unswerving faith in her God.

Friends, we waste so much time denying the realities of our lives. As much as we want good-paying jobs to come back, health to come back, friends and family to come back, and even the so-called good old days to come back, they will not. Mary's life was turned completely upside down.

God crashed into her life. She never asked for what happened. As we look at her response to her new situation, we learn that she accepted her new reality and trusted entirely in her God.

In the beautiful poem she gives in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth, Mary reveals profound insight and appreciation for the work that God was doing through her. What we fail to appreciate, as believers alongside Mary, is that God works in us and performs miracles using us as well. Have no doubt. God performs miracles with us today that are at every bit as significant as giving birth to the savior of the world. If we dare to say, "Yes!" to God in the same way that Mary said, "Yes!" to God, we, too, can sing her song with equal passion and mean it in all sincerity.

"My soul magnifies the Lord for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Mary realizes that when God chose a nobody like her to be mother of the Savior, there was new hope for everyone who was like her. In Mary's time, just like today, God's goodness and blessings were generally associated with the rich and powerful. Only those who were well off financially were thought to have been favored by God. In Mary, here is someone facing divorce and public disgrace for carrying a child before her official marriage. Even today we raise our eyebrows at pregnant brides. Yet, Mary is praising God. Under circumstances that would make most women despair, Mary became aware of the hand of God.

She proclaims boldly "The mighty one has done great things for me." How can she say such a thing? Mary was able to look at not only her immediate situation but also the whole of her life. How often do we take such a comprehensive outlook? When we face problems, do we not tend to focus only on the present and ignore the past? Aren't we worked up over insignificant events, crying over spilt milk when we forget about the goodness that has enabled us to buy the milk in the first place? Mary did not bemoan giving birth to her out-of-wedlock child. Rather, she praised God for the ability and privilege to give birth at all.

Mary also teaches us that status is temporary. Perhaps the ritual of changing presidential administrations illustrates how temporary fame and power truly are. Some love the current president and couldn't stand the last one. Others loved the previous president and hate this one. Regardless of your feelings, today's leaders will someday be on the streets and new ones will take over. Mary declares that God has "scattered the proud and brought down the powerful from their thrones." In other words, no situation is permanent. The lowly can be exalted and the exalted can be brought low. The world can turn upside down at any time: behold, insignificant Mary carries the Savior of the world.

Mary teaches us one more lesson, perhaps the most important lesson for this individualistic and self-centered generation. Mary concludes her song of praise to God by remembering that the Savior was sent as part of God's eternal promise to her people. She remembered that she was part of a larger community. She was a child of Abraham. She was one of God's chosen people. She realized that her son was responsible not only to himself or his mother but to all the children of Abraham.

When will we as a society reclaim our sense of obligation to the wider community? So many of us go through life under the illusion that we are independent of neighbors and town and nation. Give me my freedom! Who cares about anybody else! Certainly, Jesus is our personal savior. By becoming a human being, his birth tells us that we can have an individual relationship with our Lord. Nevertheless, Jesus did not come to save just me or just you, he came to save us all. God bonded with a particular community of people who shared a common ancestor. We are the spiritual heirs of Abraham. All who believe in Christ are heirs of Abraham. Therefore, salvation makes no sense unless all who are saved acknowledge that they are part of a wider community of faith.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us look beyond the spectacle of the manger in the stable and realize that this baby represents an utterly different way of looking at the world. There is no way that a child like Jesus should have amounted to anything. A poor boy, born to a young girl under suspicious circumstances, had enough strikes against him to be out of the game even before he began. Yet, he changed everything. Christmas is here! Prepare yourself for great surprises ahead. Prepare yourself for the impossible. Mary, yes Mary, is the mother of Jesus. How magnificent!

Now may the God of glory, who defies explanation, prediction, and definition, continue to shock us with overwhelming grace and love. Amen.