

Mary, the First Disciple

Luke 1:26-55

December 18, 2005

A pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. “Who is the mother of Jesus?” he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back, “Mary.”

“That’s right. Now who is the father of Jesus?”

There was quiet and fidgeting. After all, no one had told them there was going to be a quiz. Then a young girl spoke up. With assurance, she boldly announced, “It’s Virg.”

There were several seconds of silence. Then she explained, “You know, Jesus’ parents, Virg an’ Mary.”¹

I’m not attempting a message on Virg as Jesus’ father this morning, but I will share some reflections on Jesus’ mother, Mary. The entire situation surrounding Mary’s call by God was startling. It was so far from people’s expectations of the coming of the Messiah that no one but God would have designed it this way!

Simply the setting of Galilee, a Roman province in northern Palestine, was a reversal of expectations. Jerusalem Jews considered Galilee to be “the boonies.” A king certainly would not come from the backward village of Nazareth, populated by little more than a hundred people.

The angel Gabriel greets Mary saying, “Greetings, favored one!” These words have been variously translated, “Hail, O favored one!” Even “Rejoice.” The Latin translation is *Ave*, from whence we get *Ave Maria*. As the recipient of God’s favor, Mary is blessed by God’s grace. The angel offers reassurance, “The Lord is with you.”

None of this wonderful affirmation is initially comforting to Mary. She is perplexed by the angel’s words and their meaning. Mary is probably of a peasant family and she is but a young teenager. She has done nothing in her brief life to earn such a visitation or recognition from a messenger of God. Perhaps Mary is troubled because of what she anticipates may come next.

Think of it like this: what goes through your mind when the phone rings and some stranger says, “Congratulations!” or “This is your lucky day!” Initially your pulse might quicken with the anticipation that something great is coming your way. But soon the excitement is probably tempered by doubt as you wonder what the hitch is. People who greet us with news or an announcement that is too good to be true are very likely preparing to tap us for something we’d just as soon skip.

Gabriel is aware of Mary's bewilderment, for he continues, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." "Do not be afraid." This is a familiar assurance given to those who are called by God. It was spoken to Abraham and to the prophet Jeremiah. On behalf of God, Moses and Isaiah said, "Do not be afraid," to the people Israel as they called them to leave a foreign land for their homeland. In the Christmas story, it is a familiar refrain spoken to Joseph in Matthew's Gospel, and to the shepherds by the angels in Luke. "Do not be afraid, for God has chosen you."

To be chosen by God is enough to put the fear or reverence of God in you! It is an awesome and holy privilege to be called to serve God. In my role as pastor I have the responsibility of inviting members to serve the church in various capacities. I am often surprised and pleased at the honor people feel in being asked to serve the church. Of course, serving the church is not the only means whereby we are called by God. God calls us into vocations, relationships, parenting, ministries of care and nurture, and a multitude of other forms of service.

Gabriel emphasizes once again that Mary is favored by God. The angel's message is that Mary is loved by God. Divine love is empowerment for mission. It is a typical spiritual experience to be blessed with favor and called to service simultaneously.

The particular mission given Mary, as Gabriel goes on to explain, is to be the mother of God, to bear a son named Jesus. Gabriel foretells that this child will be great, sharing in the identity of God and ruling as a successor to his ancestor King David. Given Mary's lowly social status, it is absurd to think that her child could ever be a king.

Mary expresses her doubt about this possibility. Although she is a young girl of marriageable age (about 12 or 13 in the culture of the time), she has not been sexually intimate with a man. The angel again assures her not to worry, for God's Holy Spirit will take care of it all. Because of God's activity in the creation of this child, Jesus will be holy and called the "Son of God."

As further proof, Gabriel goes on to inform Mary that her elderly relative Elizabeth, who is far beyond childbearing years and barren anyway, is now pregnant. This shows that "nothing is impossible with God." Mary will find a kindred spirit in Elizabeth, who has also experienced an amazing divine intervention in her life.

Mary's response to this astounding epiphany is born of a faith that has been nurtured by her family and faith community. Even though a young teenager, she has cultivated a deep inner life with a wide openness to God's presence. She has contemplated the great commandment of her faith, "You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.” Mary’s deep love for God has made her ready to respond to God’s call. Recognizing that all of this is indeed of God, Mary offers her self as a willing participant in the wondrous workings of the Divine Lover.

Mary responds with deep faith and commitment, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” In spite of her initial concerns, Mary now willingly and fully offers herself to the service of God. She gives her self to be a co-creator with God of a holy Child, Jesus, who will bring help, salvation, and deliverance to the world. Mary enters into partnership with God, a venture not only for her personal benefit, but also for all people like her who are powerless, lowly, hungry, and insignificant.

The benefits of becoming an unwed mother are few to Mary, for she undertakes great personal risk and sacrifice in accepting this call of God. Her impending marriage to Joseph is at risk, as well as her state of honor in her culture. Mary is not fully aware of the implications this calling has for the child which she will bear and how his service on behalf of God will leave her a grieving mother. In spite of the possible consequences, Mary says “Yes” to this unique opportunity. She interprets her call as a blessing rather than a dilemma. She gives her consent to the call of God.

Mary’s response is affirmed by Elizabeth, who pronounces her “Blessed.” Mary is blessed because she believes the word of the Lord. To believe is to give one’s heart to something. Mary gives her heart to God and to the call of God. She trusts in the word of God and surrenders her life to answer the call of God.

Mary is the first disciple of Jesus. She is the first to give her heart and her life to be in relationship with Jesus. She is the first to believe the gospel, the good news that Jesus is anointed by God’s Spirit to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. Mary proves herself as an exemplar of faith in three steps: she hears the Word of God, she accepts it, and she trusts herself completely to the word of God.

Mary is an active and willing participant in this magnificent work of God. She helps us understand the true meaning of discipleship. All those who have carried a child realize that in those nine months you give your life over to the child you are carrying. You have to think constantly about the food that you eat, how much you exercise, and how much you rest. Everything that you do you do also to your unborn child.

Isn’t this what Jesus asks of his disciples? Jesus asks us to think about how every moment of our lives, every decision we make affects our

relationship with God and with those whom God has called us to love and serve. Mary's story is one of total commitment. Her willingness to undertake that commitment serves as a challenge to us as well.²

Mary reveals how we are called to live as faithful disciples of Jesus. We begin by hearing the Word of God as it is spoken in the scriptures, in prayer, in silence, in the stirrings of the soul, through mentors in the faith. Hearing the Word of God, we are called to hold it fast in our hearts, to believe it, to give our hearts to the Word of God. Deep in the warm womb of our heart, Christ is given birth within us. The Word becomes flesh, embodied in our lives, lived in our actions. Loved by God, we love others. Blessed by God's grace, we bless others through our own lives. Having taken root in our hearts, the Word bears fruit in our lives.

Like Mary, we need not earn God's favor. It is a gift, freely given no matter our social status or pedigree or education or ethnicity. God's love is freely given. It is when we are receptive to loving God back that we become partners with God and can do wonderful works together.

Father John Powell relates the struggles he had as he strove to be perfect before God, in order to earn God's love. He worked hard at serving well, at obeying the commandments, at doing everything he could think of to serve God. But there was always an uneasy feeling and an obsessive thought, "Am I doing enough? How do I look while doing it? What do others think of me for doing it? How will God bless me for doing all I am doing?"

Then one day in a moment of crisis, Father Powell heard God say to him, "*John, I don't want a performance. I just want you to let me love you.*" I JUST WANT YOU TO LET ME LOVE YOU!³

My friends, that is the good news of Christmas. God just wants you to let God love you! When God's love is given birth within, we can't help but love God back. And when two lovers meet, a powerful partnership is created and miracles occur! Let us hear the Word of God, hold it fast in our hearts, and give birth to the presence of Christ in our lives.

¹ *Homiletics*, December 2005, p. 59

² Lucy Lind Hogan, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2005, p. 28.

³ Rev. Don Shelby, First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica, December 19, 1993.

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