

Mary, The Mother of My Lord

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. While the pace quickens for everyone over the next four weeks as shopping and parties and holiday events begin to occur, we try to emphasize the holy season of Advent. It is to be a spiritual season of reflection as we capture again the wonder and anticipation of the birth of our Lord and the mystery of the Incarnation. That's what this season should really be about. I encourage you to find ways to fill these weeks with meaningful spiritual reflection and I will do my best to assist you through these Sunday messages.

Over the past twenty five years of preaching an Advent series I have tried any number of ways to bring into focus the wonder of his birth and the Incarnation. It is still to me the greatest of miracles, the wonder of wonders, that God became flesh and dwelt among us. What incredible love and grace he has shown to us.

It seems every few years I am drawn to the major players of the Christmas story. I just kept going back to this thought. I've preached about the Holy family on several occasions and we've talked about the wise men and the shepherds and Herod. There are so many fascinating aspects to this amazing story.

Today I want to focus on Mary the mother of Jesus. I don't know why I've felt so drawn to this. Maybe I've been thinking about my mother and how much I miss her. It was five years ago last March that my mom went to heaven. I can remember the smile on her face when my brother and his family and Paula and I and the girls all arrived at their house for Christmas. I can see her clapping her hands together after wiping them on her apron, there to hug everyone or to hold a grandchild, so thrilled that we were all together again. What a special lady.

Which brings me to the mother of Jesus. I wonder what Mary was like? Imagine having such an incredible responsibility as to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God. What was their relationship like? She nursed him and held him and rocked him when he cried. She taught him and protected him. But did they play games together? Did she have cookies ready when he got home from school? Did she comfort him when other kids made fun of him? Did her face light up like my Mom's when her son Jesus came home? I wonder what Mary was like.

I suppose she was like most young girls – full of plans and dreams, goals and

hopes. We don't believe Mary was born without sin (that is the belief of the immaculate conception), but we do know she was a godly young woman and highly favored by God. Like all young Jewish girls she hoped her child would grow up to be the Messiah, the one chosen to be the deliverer of Israel. And like all the other girls, she had no idea what that would eventually mean nor what kind of sacrifice that would actually demand.

Church tradition says that her mother Anne and father Joachim were unable to have children. Like the prophet Samuel's mother Hannah, Anne and Joachim promised the Lord if they had a child they would give her to the Lord. After she was born, again like Hannah with Samuel, Mary's parents presented her to the priests and she served the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem.

I don't know if any of that is true or accurate, but what I do know is that she must have been an extraordinary young lady. The Scripture refers to her as a virgin, meaning a young maiden that has not married or had sexual relations. She was a virgin, a young girl, and listen to the descriptions from Luke 1! The bible says Mary was highly favored, that the Lord was with her, she had found favor with God, and she was blessed above all other women. Elizabeth her relative said, "why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

As we understand it, God was choosing a mother for his Son so he would have chosen well, right? A virgin who was godly, humble. In fact, if we read her song, the Magnificat, we can identify more attributes. She is thankful (v46), she is humbly aware that it is God's doings and not something on her own (v48), she is God fearing (v50), again we see her great humility and gratitude, she is hungry for God and all he offers (v53), and she is a true daughter of Israel (v55).

The more I have read and studied and reflected on this young lady, the more amazed I am, the more inspired I am by her life and her courage and her commitment to God. She is not to be worshiped, but she is certainly to be honored. Like no other in the history of the world, she was favored by God to bear God in her womb. What an extraordinary thought.

It was perhaps a morning like any other. Tradition says Mary, now betrothed to Joseph, was drawing water at a well in Nazareth, the site now marked by The Church of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her with this curious greeting.

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” That has to be good news, doesn’t it? You who are richly blessed. Graced by the Lord.

Let’s read **Luke 1:26-38**. Some scholars believe Mary to have been a young teenager, maybe 14-17. Imagine the responsibility that is suddenly thrust upon her. She is to marry Joseph, whom tradition says was a much older man, a widower with children. Whether or not she is about to become a step-mother to Joseph’s children, if in fact that is the case, she is about to become pregnant before marriage. Pregnant but single. Some of you understand and can relate to the emotions of joy mixed with fear. Pregnant and unmarried. Some of you understand how she must have felt, knowing that she faced speculation and perhaps ridicule and scorn from family and community. What would her parents think? This couple that had given her to God? Would they think she had fallen from her place of holiness and devotion to the Lord? How would the townspeople treat her? How would they react?

And what about Joseph? How could she explain this pregnancy? What could she do? What would Joseph do? Matthew’s gospel tells us something of how Joseph reacted – intending to break the engagement until the Lord spoke to him and explained what was happening.

I just can’t get over what must have been going through her heart and mind. How overwhelming it all must have seemed to her. I mean, it’s overwhelming to me just reading about it. **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”** We can’t imagine what she felt hearing that. How could she begin to comprehend that. And the angel had said her child was to be named Jesus which means Savior. **“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”** That sounds like he will be the Messiah and the King, but that also sounds like trouble. What will that mean for Mary and what will that mean for her son? It was a dangerous time for Jewish nationalists. Mary knew that not too many miles from her home in Nazareth the Roman General Varus had put down a Jewish insurrection and crucified 2,000 Jews and then burned the cities of Sepphoris and Emmaus to the ground. In fact, Joseph probably

helped rebuild Sepphoris since it was close to Nazareth. All this talk sounds thrilling and wonderful and dangerous.

The angel Gabriel gets his answer and leaves rather abruptly. It just says, "Then the angel left her." I would have had a few more questions. I need some further details. I need to know the what if's. What if Joseph doesn't believe me? Can I back out? What if my parents don't believe me? Will you be here to tell them? Is this going to disrupt my whole life? Is this going to hurt?

May I tell you, the place where God's kingdom and God's plans break in upon this earthly kingdom and our plans, there is usually some pain involved. And it seems to me we get some information on a "need to know" basis. God calls Mary to a place of surrender and commitment, to a place of sacrifice, to a place of obedience, and there would be pain involved, and she wouldn't have all the information and answers up front. There would be a tearing of her flesh as she gave birth to her Son, God's son, and there would be a sword that would pierce her soul as well, according to Simeon in Luke 2.

And God calls us to a place of surrender and commitment as well. And like Mary, it will be a place of sacrifice and obedience, and there will be pain involved and we likely won't have all the answers or all the information up front. There will be a tearing in our flesh as well as we deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. It is no small thing to surrender your everything to God and his will for your life.

Mary could view this whole thing as either more trouble than she has ever known or as a far greater favor and blessing than she has ever known. It will be determined by her response. And the same can be said for all of us. God is calling all of us this morning, not in as dramatic a fashion as Mary, but all of us are being called to surrender to him, to his will for us, to his plans and his purpose for our lives. All of us are being called to a life of obedience to Christ. And we are given a choice, just like Mary.

You see, Mary could have said, "Listen, thanks for offering, but no. Really, I'm just not the person for this. I'm not the mothering type. I can't do this. Joseph will be upset, Mom and Dad will be embarrassed, and what about my plans for a quiet life here in Nazareth? It's just going to cost me too much. You'll have to find someone else."

Mary could have chosen to avoid the pain. No risk, no embarrassment, no trouble with family or with Joseph, no birth pains in a stable, no running from Herod and hiding in Egypt. She could have said no, stayed right there in Nazareth, married Joseph, had a few kids and lived happily ever after.

But oh, what Mary would have missed! What playing it safe would have cost Mary in the Kingdom of God. The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.”

Mary, you could skip the pain and the sacrifice, but you’ll miss the best, the greatest. You’ll miss knowing God in a way that no one has ever known him or will ever know him. You would miss the pain of birthing a child in a stable, but you would also miss the glory of holding the Son of God in your arms, cradling the One who cradled the stars as he flung them into space.

Yes, a call to obedience and surrender may be a call to pain as the Spirit confronts the sinful, willful flesh, but it is worth the sacrifice and pain. Obedience is always a call to come up higher. It’s a call to experience the grace and glory of God like you’ve never experienced it before. It’s a call to be more than you could ever be. A call to obedience is a call to accomplish more than you could ever accomplish on your own and by yourself. It is a call to experience God’s very best. It is a call to align yourself with his cause, his will, his way, his purpose. It is a call to walk in intimacy with the One who is faithful. It is a call to an extraordinary life. The call is being made to Mary and to all of us. How will we answer?

Mary asks only one question. “**How will this be since I am a virgin?**” Just one question. I think I would have had so many more questions, but it seems all so simple for Mary. “Just tell me this – how will this be?” And the answer itself was quite simple. Mary, “**Nothing is impossible with God.**” That’s all she needed to hear.

Remember where Mary was in the context of Israel’s history. There had been no prophet, no word from God. 400 years of apparent silence. And then an angel announces that God is with this teen-aged girl in Galilee and tells her nothing is impossible with God. I can imagine Mary thinking, “That’s what I had heard. That’s what the priests told me and what my mother and father told me. They recounted the

stories of the miracles of the patriarchs and the prophets, but there has been no prophet for so long. There has been no good news. Our land is occupied by the Romans. Things look impossible to most of us. Jews are being executed at the whim of the Emperor and the King. We had started to wonder if God had forgotten his promise to Abraham and his descendants. Maybe the days of miracles are past.” But the angel said nothing was impossible with God and that’s all Mary needed to know. “If God can do the impossible, then he can make this happen as well and I can deliver this child. If nothing is impossible with God then I can say yes to all God has for me!”

And with that knowledge in her heart and mind, we hear Mary say these powerful words of surrender and commitment, **“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”** I like the King James Version: **“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word.”** (KJV)

I surrender Lord. I am your servant and I want to do what pleases you and honors you. I may open myself to all kinds of things and may be misunderstood by family or friends but Lord, I belong to you. I am your servant. Here I am, Lord, do with me and my life as you see fit.

That is complete surrender. And there may be a battle that comes with surrender, but oh what glory and joy comes with it as well. Listen again as Mary sings, **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.”**

And look at verse 45. It’s Elizabeth’s affirmation of Mary and it sums up so much concerning Mary’s faith. **“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.”**

Here are the keys to Mary’s life: Her willingness to believe what the Lord said would be accomplished in her life and her willingness to surrender to whatever God deserved for her life.

Surrender and believe. Trust and obey. It leads to the miraculous. It leads to salvation and redemption. It leads to joy and holiness. Mary believed that what God had told her through the angel Gabriel would be accomplished.

May I challenge you today to submit your life to Christ the way his mother submitted her life to God. Trust him, even when what he is calling you to do looks impossible. Obey him even when it seems risky to do so. Surrender to him even when the cost seems great. For his call to you - to walk in obedience and surrender, to trust his promises and to rely upon his faithfulness, that call leads to victory for you and for others. Mary's obedience led to salvation and redemption for us all. Your obedience will make the difference in your life and in the life of those around you.

Mary was special. Mary was unique, blessed, highly favored, chosen. But so are you. You are unique, special. You've been blessed by God's mercy and grace. You've been favored by God. He chose Mary to bear his Son and give birth to the Redeemer, but he chose you to receive life from the Son, to be born again into the kingdom of God. He chose you and called you his daughter, his son, his beloved. He wants to walk in fellowship with you as well.

How do you respond to his call today? Just like Mary did so long ago. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Lord, what ever you want, here I am! Will you surrender to him today? Will you believe that what he has promised, what he has said to you, he will do? Will you commit your life and your future to him today? It will make all the difference in the world.