

MARY AS A MODEL

Luke 1:26-38

December 18, 2011

It's certainly not the first time we've heard this story, is it? We recall the announcement that came to Mary, the Annunciation it is called. We remember the basic details but it has more to say than relating a sweet sentimental account. To put it bluntly: after the telling – so what?! How can this little narrative take on meaning for a group of folk like yourselves hearing it 2000+ years later. That's our shared task this morning, one we are not equal to without the presence of the promised Spirit. Like the maid Mary we would be left puzzled without some divine help.

The messenger who brings the news, an angel, is not insensitive to the disruptive impact it would have. By that I mean Mary was probably a teenager, although time will prove she was quite extraordinary. It isn't every day one gets a divine visitation with such a monumental message. "Hail favored one, the Lord is with you!" Most would have screamed and fled, but Mary is not the hysterical type. She is however disturbed and puzzled by this totally off-the-charts greeting which fits not her frame of reference nor anyone else's. But Angel Gabriel, fully aware of her says, "Don't be afraid – and then tells her all her plans. The path of life for a young woman in a small Galilean village will be utterly and irretrievably altered. You will bear a son of all sons, a great king of kings, Lord of Lords and of his kingdom there shall be no end. In short the Messiah,

God incarnate, just the greatest being to walk the earth."

Then Mary jumps to her feet and says, "Yes!" No – her response is simple, naïve, practical. "How can this be? I am a virgin." And the angel said, "It's a God thing." Well, a little more eloquent than that; a bit more mysterious: The Spirit and Power of the Most High will generate this pregnancy.

Further, because no one will understand and there will be buzz about your pre-nuptial pregnancy and whispers of shame, Elizabeth, your cousin who is on the other end of the scale relative to child-bearing years is pregnant. She'll understand and rejoice with you over what has transpired. Nothing's impossible with God.

And Mary said, "Are you sure you got the right girl?" I say that not to be clever or cute, but to underscore the real answer ... one that illuminates the character of this Mary, her trust in God. "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word."

And the angel departed. Message delivered. And nine months later she delivered – a baby boy, the one in whom the divine and human meet and in whom we meet God.

Now instead of thinking, "O.K. I've got it ... again," may I invite you to look a bit deeper. I went to an art museum once and saw a lot of old paintings; some I recognized, but I did not particularly appreciate them until I broke down and purchased a set of earphones and a clip-on receiver unit. What a difference! So let's take a few moments to don the earphones or as Jesus put it, "Let (s)he who has ears hear.

First, note the specificity, the details in which the story is framed. It was at a specific month (the 6th) that a specific angel (Gabriel) was sent to a specific town (Nazareth) in a specific province (Galilee) to a specific young woman a virgin whose name was Mary. Is the author trying to say what I'm telling you isn't legend or mythic. It's historical, a real life, time and space event.

Further, the place was not where one of that day would have expected. Kings are born in palaces; in Jerusalem ... study had to be made to discover it was not only possible, and more than probably ... it was prophesied that Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Further still, the angelic annunciation came to one essentially anonymous. All of which says this God of surprises can and does break in to unsuspecting little people in any out of the way place God chooses. Even you ... where you are. Watch out! There often is a powerful note of unpredictability about our God. We try to predict so we can plan, control ... but this account reminds us we're not in control. God is. So be prepared for the unexpected, the unimaginable ... even in our carefully prescribed routines. Mary's experience is case in point.

Robert Morris tells a somewhat amusing and also telling story about a disheveled Hispanic man who showed up at the rear of a church after midnight service on Christmas Eve. The pastor of this particular inner city congregation, named Mark, was a friend of Robert Morris. Mark was a man who was devoted to serving the homeless, but he was getting weary and this final Hispanic

gentleman was almost "one homeless person too many" for him. Mark knew that his commitment to being a "caring" pastor had put him in this position, but he was starting to feel sorry for himself. On the way to the shelter, he stewed in his own anger at himself, at the man, and ultimately at God.

Finally, realizing he didn't know the stranger's name, he asked. The man answered, "Hayzoos," which is, of course, the Spanish pronunciation for "Jesus." The ironic humor of the whole situation suddenly washed over Mark's mind and heart. Here he was griping to God about taking a man named Jesus to a shelter on Christmas Eve! He felt as if it were a huge cosmic trick. The comic aspect of it both judged his anger and redeemed him out of it. "Leave it to God to beat us at our own game," he thought to himself. And so, gratefully, that Christmas Eve he provided shelter to a homeless man named "Hayzoos," Jesus.¹

Many declare Mary was the first disciple. She has been exalted in some traditions to divine status. In our own tradition she is honored but not beatified. Her courage and willingness to say "Yes" represent the way of faith for us all. Mary was a model.

How is that?

1. Mary didn't choose her role. She was chosen. Called. We don't find God though we often use that language to describe our spiritual journey. God came to find us.

¹ Dynamic Preaching, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4, p. 84-85

2. It is not uncommon to be puzzled, to question; to be afraid. Truth is we don't have all the answers; we don't know where it may lead ... we simply trust as best we can the One who calls.

3. Mary felt unworthy. In any authentic encounter with the Divine, there is a sense of unworthiness. How can this be for someone like me?

4. Mary accedes ... says, "As you wish ... " and in doing so plays a significant role in God's providence.

5. Mary allows God/Jesus to be born in her. So too do we. Christ in us, the hope of glory.

God still "enlists" and equips us to do the extraordinary ... even the miraculous ... even little ol' me. Yes! That's not the end of the story ... that's where it begins.



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