

Mary's Faith and Vision

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
A new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 2, 2012, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: Luke 1:38-55

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Hang on just a second while I make this call.

Hello. God? Yeah. Gabe here. Look, I've been all over Nazareth looking for this girl "Mary." Do have any idea how many Marys there are in Nazareth? You do? Yeah, I suppose you would know.

Look, this is getting pretty repetitive. I find a girl named Mary. I tell her, "Greetings favored one, God is with you," and she looks at me like I've got drool dripping from the corner of my mouth or some spinach stuck in my teeth. I explain that you want her to get pregnant so that she can give birth to a son who will inherit the throne of David and do really cool stuff, and before I can get to the part about her cousin who's been barren into her old age being pregnant, too, I'm getting chased out of the house with a broom or worse. None – I mean NONE – of these girls is interested.

I haven't what? I haven't been to the right Mary yet. Do you really think there is a Mary in this town who's going to say, "Yes"? I mean these other girls have been SO negative on the idea. Maybe you need to switch strategies.

Okay, okay, I'll try the next one on the list. Okay. Bye-bye.

I try to imagine the story of Mary, much of which we heard read today, from Mary's point of view, too. What do you say when an angel visits you? I imagine it must be a little disturbing. There she was, minding her own business, making some bread or doing some household chores, when she felt this presence. I wonder how she would have described it. I imagine seeing an angel as being like seeing light and hope and peace and joy all at once. I imagine it would be wonderful and scary and a little overwhelming. Okay, a lot overwhelming.

This angel speaks: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Favored one? What does that mean? "Don't be afraid," the angel says. Don't be afraid. Don't think of a pick elephant. I don't imagine that helped.

And then the angel goes into this whole bit about having a son by the Holy Spirit of God. What would you say? This could get messy pretty quickly. Sex outside of marriage was seen as a no-no. No being a virgin at marriage was seen as a no-no. If all this happens, Mary could be dragged away and stoned to death. Convincing Joseph that the baby isn't his but is his – I see guests for a future episode of the Jerry Springer show.

What does Mary say? "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I think the most miraculous part of this story is Mary's "Yes."

We are invited to identify with Mary in her pregnancy, experiencing her unborn child kicking in her womb. By claiming her story, by claiming the birth story, we name ourselves people of possibilities.

“When we don’t want to even pick up this morning’s newspaper, when confronted with yet another death toll, when angry with our fellow citizens – we claim that there still exists a possibility for understanding, a possibility for peace and reconciliation, a possibility that today, or maybe tomorrow, good news will triumph, change will happen.

“When we see some of this darkness, violence, and apathy inside of ourselves and do battle with our responsibilities in this world – we claim that a possibility still exists for renewal, for light to enter into ourselves, a possibility that we can actually show love to others. There exists a possibility all around us and within each of us for incarnation to occur. The mystery and the glory of incarnation ... are that we will always confront it in the region of the unexpected.”¹

Listen to the words of Mary’s song. Listen to her sing of her hope in what God is doing in her “yes.”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me ... God has shown strength with his arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Maybe all of this really could happen. “Maybe people will be healed. Maybe the poor will be fed. Maybe all will be treated and loved as equals. Maybe peace will reign and wars will cease. ... Maybe Word will become flesh. Maybe God will become human, just like us. ... Maybe the dead will rise again. Maybe the old will become new. ... Maybe God will be revealed in the beggar, the prostitute, or even the politician we wrote off years ago.”²

And I don’t want the sinless Mary. I don’t want the Mary, meek and mild. I want the Mary of the magnificat. I want the Mary who raises a scandal with her pregnancy, who has a past, who has problems, who could have said “no” to God and had the chutzpa to say “yes.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God’s will.”³

That’s why it doesn’t matter if the Mary story ever happened. What’s important is how the Mary story touches us, how it stirs us, what it moves us to do. Will we, with our scandals and pasts and problem have the chutzpa to say “yes” to God’s call and “yes” to God’s vision?

I believe that God is at work in you and me in much the same way that God was at work in Mary. Not that God is knocking any of us up, but that God is inviting us to carry in our bodies the blessing of God for the world. Having the faith and vision Mary had means allowing yourself to trust how God is at work in our lives. Mary knew about the radical social upheaval that was about to be ushered in, thanks to her faith and her vision.

“You couldn’t get much lower in those days than to be a woman in a patriarchal society, a Jew under Roman occupation, and a peasant in a land of plenty.”⁴ And that’s

what the story tells us Mary was. A poor, Jewish woman in occupied Palestine chosen by God to bear the gift for which the world longed.

“God’s promises had already become truth in her flesh. The poor were already being exalted. ...

“At the news, she went ‘with haste’ to see her cousin Elizabeth. It was a natural response. When afraid, go see a friend who will listen and make it all feel a little less lonely and overwhelming.

“... Mary, still trembling with the news of what was to be fulfilled in her, ran to the elderly Elizabeth and embraced her. At Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s womb came to life, and the child ‘leaped for joy’ within her!

“The Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise and hope, flowed forth in this setting. And two miraculously pregnant women basked in the secret of the quiet revolution that was to be accomplished through them. Two women incarnated the truth that, with God, nothing is impossible.

“I like to imagine what their days together were like. They must have been filled with shared secrets, laughter, a few tears, and dreams of a future unlike any they had conceived before. They watched their wombs swell, felt their sons growing within, probably rubbed each other’s aching backs and sore feet at the end of the day.

“Elizabeth, in her experience and wisdom, had much to share with her younger cousin. She understood the requirements of faith and the challenges of marriage. She knew that some would point with scorn at Mary, pregnant before her wedding, just as some had spoken of her own barrenness with reproach. She knew how to live proudly despite the whispers behind her back, and how to be grateful to God no matter what the circumstances. She understood what it meant to be a vessel of God’s will. ...

“Together they nurtured a revolution. The tables began turning. The thrones began crumbling.”⁵

Though I must admit that I feel like I’ve been left out of this revolution. The lofty are brought down and the outcasts are lifted up, but what about the middle class? Where are we in this revolution?

I think we are to sing Mary’s song and do some soul-searching to figure out where we fit in the cosmic order of God’s reign. For instance, do we rely on God to fill us with good things? All too often, I know that I rely on myself to fill my physical and spiritual belly with junk food. I’ve perpetuate this bad habit of stuffing myself on commercial Christmas crap instead of figuring out a deeper place in God’s reign that moves me away from materialism and into trust. And in singing Mary’s song, we can embrace her faith and her vision.⁶

There’s an old Slavic fable. Once upon a time, God decided to make Godself visible to two humans – one king and the other a simple peasant. God sent an angel to each of them with the message: “God has condescended to reveal the Lord to you in whatever form you wish. In what form do you want the Lord to appear?”

Seated pompously on his throne and surrounded by his awestruck subjects – not to mention basking in the glory of having been addressed in public by no lesser a

personage than an Angel of God – the king proclaimed (in all his majestic pomp): “How else would I wish to see the Lord, except in his full majesty and power? Show the Lord to us in the full glory and majesty which is the Lord’s alone!”

And with that, there appeared a bolt of lightning that instantly incinerated the king, his throne, and the entire Court. And there remained only the Might of God, who had appeared exactly as the King had specified. Except that now there was none left to see.

Then the angel appeared to a peasant, who of course knew nothing of what had happened to the King. The angel gave him the very same message as he had the king. “God has condescended to manifest the Lord to you in whatever manner you wish. How do you wish to see the Lord?”

The peasant scratched his head a while, and puzzled for a good while longer. He was a simple man, but an honest and honorable one. Finally, after long and obviously painful thought, the peasant said: “Change me so that I can see the Lord in those things with which I am familiar. Let me see the Lord in the earth I plow, the water I drink, and the food I eat. Let me see the presence of the Lord in the faces of my family, my friends, and my neighbors, and – if God wishes it, and thinks it good for myself and for others – why, let me see the Lord even in my own reflection.”

And God granted the peasant’s wish.⁷

Perhaps, if we embrace Mary’s faith and vision as our own, God will grant the peasant’s wish for us as well. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ Andrew J. Hoeksema, “Speaking of Maybe,” *Sojourners*, http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0512&article=051222&mode=sermon_prep&week=C_Advent_2 (1 December 2012).

² *Ibid.*

³ at least according to a quote someone posted on Facebook.

⁴ Joyce Hollyday, “Vacant Thrones,” *Sojourners*, http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_941249_CAdvent4&week=C_Advent_4 (1 December 2012).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Becoming Mary’s Servants,” *Sojourners*, http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_061249_CAdvent4&week=C_Advent_4 (1 December 2012).

⁷ I don’t remember the source of this folktale. I probably collected it years ago when an ecumenical electronic bulletin board, a precursor to the Internet called “Ecunet,” existed.

Additional sources used:

Martin L. Smith, “A Body Prepared for Me,” *Sojourners*, http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_121249_CAdvent4&week=C_Advent_4 (1 December 2012).

Madia Bolz-Weber, “There’s Just Something About Mary: The Power of Yes,” *Sojourners*, http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=bl_111220_Bolz_Weber_Theres_Just&week=C_Christmas_1 (1 December 2012).

Richard Rohr, OFM, “Matter and Spirit,” *Sojourners*,

http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_791249_CAvent4&week=C_Advent_4 (1 December 2012).