

## Mary: Faith and Difficult Assignments *Luke 1:26-38*

Yesterday, we put up our outdoor Christmas lights and wreaths. Our neighborhood has a tradition of hanging lights in our yards that zigzag up and down from the ground to the trees. It's kind of a fun tradition. It's one of the things we do to prepare for the Christmas season.

As Dave mentioned earlier, today is the first Sunday in Advent; a season of waiting and preparation. On one hand we wait and prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ, but there is a second sense in which we wait and prepare for the second coming of Christ. During these four weeks of Advent, we will take a break from our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount in order to focus on Advent. We will return to it in January.

This year we are taking a look at Mary the mother of Jesus. What an incredible role she was called to play in salvation history. Today we are going to start by looking at the difficult assignment that she received from God and how she responded. We are going to be in Luke 1:26-38.

### Mary's Example of Faith

*<sup>26</sup> Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.*

We are told that the angel Gabriel was *sent from God* to a young woman in the city of Nazareth. Before we ever learn this woman's name, we learn something about her. She is a *virgin*. In fact, we are told twice that she is a virgin before we learn that her name is *Mary*. This virgin is *engaged* to a man named Joseph.

In Jewish culture, young women were typically engaged or betrothed to be married soon after puberty. Many estimate that Mary was around 13-16 years of age. Engagement was a legally binding commitment. Mary was legally bound to Joseph, but the sexual relationship was not permitted until marriage.

Verse 28:

*<sup>28</sup> And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."  
<sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.*

This greeting, *Hail, favored one!*, can either be understood to be a commendation to Mary for her character or it can be understood to be a greeting expressing that Mary is

to be the recipient of special grace from God. I think that is what is going on. The angel is declaring to Mary something that will prepare her for what she will soon hear.

The angel also declares that *the Lord is with* Mary - His presence; His power is with Mary. And so, even before the angel declares the assignment that God has for Mary he encourages her with these truths.

Mary's response? She is greatly *troubled at this statement*. She's perplexed; she's confused and so she *kept pondering* what in the world was meant by such a greeting. As one commentator said, it's as if she is asking a wordless question.

The angel speaks to Mary's wordless question and says, "*Do not be afraid, Mary.*" Angelic beings often cause fear and often told people to not be afraid. In Mary's case it seems that her fear has to do with the content of the angel's greeting rather than his presence. The angel speaks reassurance to her and says, *you have found favor with God*. The angel is assuring her of God's grace and favor that is flowing towards Mary.

With that reassurance, the angel communicates God's assignment for Mary. Verse 31:

*<sup>31</sup> "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; <sup>33</sup> and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."*

We learn that God's assignment for Mary is to *conceive*, give birth to a son, and to *name Him Jesus*. With the assignment communicated, Mary again has a question, but this time it is not an unspoken question. Verse 34:

*<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

Luke doesn't say, but we can infer that Mary understood that this conception would come about before she was married. And so she asks, "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" I haven't been with a man.

*<sup>35</sup> And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> "And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> "For nothing will be impossible with God."*

And so, how can this be? It's a God-thing.

This word, *overshadow*, is also used in each of the Transfiguration accounts (Matt. 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:34) to describe the cloud that descended and covered Jesus, Moses and

Elijah. It has the sense of the holy, powerful presence of God. At the Transfiguration, it was out of this cloud that God spoke and identified Jesus as God's Son. In the same way, Mary will be overshadowed by the presence of God and the baby that she will conceive and bear *shall be called the Son of God*. The angel's point is that Mary's pregnancy would be the work of God.

In verse 36, the angel mentions Mary's relative, Elizabeth, as an example that God can do amazing things. He can cause the barren to bear a child. But in Mary's case, He would cause a virgin to conceive and bear a child.

And then the angel makes a grand affirmation that gets right to the heart of Mary's question, "How can this be?" He says *For nothing is impossible with God*. This can happen, Mary, because God is God and He can do anything.

Verse 38:

*<sup>38</sup> And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

Mary responds with an unreserved readiness to obey. She responds in faith and submits to this assignment from God. I'm your servant, Lord, *be it done to me according to your word*. The angel seeing Mary's willing response departs.

As we see Mary's response, it highlights one of the central principles that is illustrated for us in this passage. And that is this: **When God gives us a difficult assignment, we need to respond in faith.** Mary responded with unbelievable faith. She didn't have answers. She didn't know what it would all mean. She simply knew that she had heard from God and she responded by faith.

It is easy for us to take her response for granted. Of course she would respond in faith because that's the Christmas story. She had to. But if we simply take her response for granted, we miss the very real faith of Mary that can encourage our faith. Mary was a real flesh and blood person who had a choice to make. And it was a choice that she had to make living in the her religious, social and cultural context. Scot McKnight in his book, *The Real Mary*, makes this point:

We need to consider her context - what it [would] have been like for a first-century teenage Jewish woman to trust God and what it would have been like to tell this conception story first to her family and then to Joseph and then to others in public.

And then he adds, "When we consider this context, we will come into touch with Mary's real faith" (*The Real Mary*, 9). I believe it is Mary's "real faith" that we need to see and be encouraged by and so I want to consider this context for just a moment.

First, as we've seen, though Mary was not yet married to Joseph, she was betrothed. Legally she was his wife. And so in the case of any infidelity, the laws regulating adultery would apply. Mary would have known such laws. She knew the teaching of Deuteronomy 22:23-24 which said:

*<sup>23</sup> "If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, <sup>24</sup> then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you.*

Who would believe her story that the child she carried was conceived by the Holy Spirit? The only explanation in people's minds would have been that Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph. She would be seen as an adulteress; an evil that should be purged from Israel. The Deuteronomy passage says that stoning was the punishment adultery. In the first century, it is not clear that this command was followed very often, but that was the prescribed punishment. As virtuous as she might truly be, she would not be viewed that way.

Second, Mary had no idea how Joseph would respond. Would he believe her? From our vantage point, we know how he will respond. But Mary didn't know. What Mary did know was that there was a provision in the Old Testament to prove the guilt or innocence of a woman regarding adultery (Num. 5:11-31). If Joseph didn't believe her, he could bring her before the priest to have the priest follow the Numbers 5 instructions for testing for one's innocence or guilt regarding adultery. If so, Mary would have been made to let her hair down, and under oath drink a mixture of dust and water mixed with the ink from the priest's written curse. If a woman was guilty she would become sick. If she didn't become sick she would be acquitted. It is a strange test to us, but it is what the Law prescribed in such cases. It was a humbling ordeal to go through. Would she be subjected to this ordeal? She didn't know.

Third, even if she was not subjected to this ordeal, she didn't know whether or not Joseph might simply divorce her leaving her to raise this child on her own. If so, she would be poor and unprotected. We are told in Matthew 1:19:

*<sup>19</sup> And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly.*

To *put her away* means to divorce her. Matthew tells us that that was Joseph's intent. We know that in the very next verse an angel showed up and told Joseph the truth of Mary's pregnancy; that she was indeed pregnant by the Holy Spirit and he changed his mind. But Mary living in the moment didn't know that God would send an angel to Joseph. She had no idea what Joseph, who was probably the most important person in her life at this point, would do.

Finally, Mary also knew that because most people would never believe the truth about this pregnancy, Jesus would be seen as an illegitimate child. She knew that Deut. 23:2 said:

<sup>2</sup> *"No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the LORD.*

Mary had to have thought that Jesus would be ostracized and ridiculed. No mother wants to see her child treated like that.

This was the context of Mary's decision. Unknowns. Uncertainties. No guarantees. All sorts of risk. In that context she said, "Yes." She responded in faith to this difficult assignment. And that is our need as well. Respond in faith. Trust God. Believe that He is up to something bigger than we can imagine. We too need to respond in faith. That's the first principle that we see here.

The second principle relates to a perspective that we see in Mary's response that if we can share it, it will help us respond with the same willing obedience to difficult assignments from God. And that perspective is this: **When we understand that we exist for God, we are in a better position to respond in faith to difficult assignments.** After the angel laid out the assignment from God and as difficult as it was Mary simply said, "*Behold, the bondservant of the Lord.*" Mary took the position of a servant. That is a critical perspective.

Sometimes we think that God exists for us. We think that He exists to make our lives easy and nice and comfortable. And so with that view, how dare He give us difficult assignments. But the truth is, God does not exist for us; we exist for Him. We exist to serve Him and His purposes. And so, when we, like Mary, can say, "God, here I am, your bondservant, your servant" we are in a position to respond to difficult assignments with faith. We are in a better place to willingly receive God's assignments even when we know there will be personal cost.

When God gives us a difficult assignment, we need to respond in faith. And when we understand that we exist for God, we are in a better position to respond in faith to difficult assignments. Finally, here is the last principle that I want to mention that we see illustrated in this passage: **God has the right to give us difficult assignments.**

Mary is just a typical young Jewish woman growing up in Israel at the time. She's preparing for her marriage to Joseph and looking forward to what life will bring for them. And then all of a sudden, an angel from God shows up and presents Mary with an assignment that will rock her world. Nothing will ever be the same for Mary. All her plans and hopes and dreams of a certain kind of life with Joseph is tossed upside down. God has the right to do that.

He does this kind of thing throughout the pages of Scripture. Moses was called to lead a grumbling people out of captivity in Egypt. Joshua was given the task of leading the nation into the Promised Land battle by battle. Many of the prophets were called to speak forth God's word to a rebellious nation. Paul was called to preach the gospel at the risk of his life. All difficult assignments. And in each case, God had the right to do that.

God has the right to give us difficult assignments as well - assignments that further His eternal plans. Assignments that reveal God and His glory on earth. I don't think God gives us such assignments just to make our lives difficult, they further His purposes.

Sometimes they are big assignments - like a career change or a missionary calling. Sometimes they are smaller assignments like the conviction that God wants you to love a difficult person. Sometimes it is easy to see how the assignment furthers His purposes in the world; sometimes it is not that easy. It is pretty easy to understand how the assignment to serve as a missionary in another culture or how sharing the Good News of Christ with a friend further His purposes. It might not be as easy to see how the assignment to live with a chronic disease or to raise a handicapped child furthers God's purposes. But even there, I believe, God works out his purposes when we receive those assignments by faith and accept them as God's servants.

God has the right to give us difficult assignments.

My hope for us as individuals and corporately as a church is that we would follow Mary's example of faith. And that we would share her perspective that we exist for God; rather than thinking that God exists for us. And so if God should choose to give us as individuals or as a church a difficult assignment, that we, like Mary, would respond in faith and say, "Yes, Lord. I'm your servant. Or, yes, Lord, this church is your servant. Be it done to me or to us according to your word."

This Advent, as you are reminded of Mary let me encourage you to pray, "God, may I have the faith of Mary. Like Mary, may I have the willingness to serve you regardless of the unknowns and regardless of the potential costs." She is a great example of faith for us to follow.

Amen.