

There is an all-too-common tendency nowadays to think that all religions are basically the same, and that all faiths teach that God is love, and we should love our neighbors as ourselves. In our politically correct modern world we don't want to offend anyone by claiming that our faith is superior to theirs, or that our understanding of God's self-revelation trumps theirs. But our faith is superior and our understanding better because Jesus Christ is, as the Bible claims, the unique Creator God, come to us in the flesh to save us. Jesus is the only way, and we dismiss this reality at our own peril.

We downplay the uniqueness and power of God in Christ out of fear. We're afraid to offend. We're afraid to be different. We're afraid to stand alone against the culture. We're afraid to commit. If we decide that the claims of the Christianity faith are true, then we have to decide that all other claims are false; and we simply don't want the responsibility of having to choose sides. Life is filled with hard choices, and it is foolish to think we can avoid them, especially about something as important as our faith. We're afraid, and so we lack the courage to act as we should.

Mary was scared, too. The annunciation was a shock for many reasons. Imagine being confronted by an angel! To have a cosmic creature appear with a message must be absolutely terrifying. And then consider that Mary was probably about fourteen years old, from a poor family, and she would face certain disgrace over this news. I imagine Mary panicked a little and wondered "why me?" Yet, she drew herself up and showed great courage in how she responded to God and to God's message, and that courage makes her one of the great figures of the Bible.

The first thing Mary does is think. She uses her powers of reason. On this point we are ill-served by our translations. Right after the angel appears, the text says, "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (1:29). But the word *wondered* literally means to use logic, to reason with intensity. It means that Mary tried to figure out how it could all be true.

Today we like to say that we are rational and scientific people – we ask hard questions, use logic, and demand empirical evidence – and therefore it is impossible for us to believe in the appearance of an angel. It wasn't any easier for Mary to fathom that the Creator God of the universe would become a human in order to save God's people. There is no place in the world where there are not enormous barriers to believing the proclamation that the Creator God of the universe is coming into a girl's womb to be born as a human being through her. At no time has that idea fit comfortably with the prevailing wisdom of the age. The annunciation was and

is a major challenge to all paradigms and worldviews, which demands hard intellectual work; and Mary does not shirk from it. We must be willing, like Mary, to use our reason to weigh the gospel message.

The second thing Mary does is to express her doubts. She says to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Mary doesn't simply knuckle under and say, "Well, you're an angel and this is all miraculous, so I'll just accept it." No, she says what any rational person would say: how can I have a child if I have not been with a man? Mary is honest about her uncertainties and questions.

There are, I think, two kinds of doubts. Dishonest doubts are both proud and cowardly; they show disdain and laziness. A dishonest doubt is to say, "What a crazy idea!" and then just walks away. It's a way of getting out of the hard work of thinking. By contrast, honest doubts are humble, because they lead you to ask questions, not simply put up walls. And when you ask a real question it makes you somewhat vulnerable. Mary's question to the angel actually asks for information and leaves her open to the possibility of an answer that might cause her to shift her views. Honest doubts are open to belief.

And here's what I find wonderful. If Mary had never expressed a doubt, the angel would never have spoken one of the great statements of Scripture: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). I'm so grateful for her doubt, because all kinds of people have been helped immensely by those words. And the only reason we get this extra revelation is because Mary doubted, she asked questions, and she was open to the answer.

The third thing Mary does is surrender completely. After she hears, "Nothing will be impossible with God," she makes her move. She surrenders to God's will, saying, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said" (1:38). Or, if you prefer the elegance of the old King James Version: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

People sometimes say, "I'd like to be a Christian, but will I have to do this? Will I have to give up doing that?" Those are important questions and each of us must ask those questions of ourselves. Jesus himself tells us to "count the cost" of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33). But I'm afraid many people want to negotiate the cost rather than count it. They are willing to give up some things, but they won't give up the right to determine what those things are. They fail to understand the truth of the old saying: "When it comes to following Jesus, the hardest thing to give is in." When you give your life to Christ your heart must say something like what Mary's said: "I don't know all that you are going to ask of me, Lord. But I'll do whatever you say in

your Word, whether I like it or not, and I'll accept patiently whatever you send into my life, whether I understand it or not."

God chose to come to us in the most unconventional way. God used the most unlikely people to accomplish God's purpose. God could have worked in any number of ways, but this was God's way of saying, "I don't do things the way the world expects. My power is made perfect in weakness. My Savior-Prince will be born in a stable, not a palace. For Jesus will win salvation through weakness, suffering, and death on the cross. He will achieve power and influence through sacrificial service. And if you have Jesus in your life, you will taste much of that same treatment. But my salvation works like this – suffering leads to glory and death to resurrection. So have no fear. Receive Jesus into your life, and I will be your honor. It doesn't matter what the world thinks."

If you really want Jesus in your life, you must obey him unconditionally. You have to give up control of your life and drop your conditions. You have to give up the right to say, "I will obey if...I will do this if..." As soon as you say, "if" that is not obedience. What it really says, is "you are my consultant, not my Lord. I will be happy to take your recommendations – and I might even do some of them – but I will choose them." But if you truly want Jesus *with you*, you have to give up the right to self-determination.

Mary does one last thing that can instruct us. She goes to Elizabeth, who speaks to her in the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary seeks out the community of believers to help guide her in her walk with God. We all need the counsel of others. We all need the counsel of mature Christians. We all need the prayers of our brothers and sisters. We all need the community of God's people to surround and support us. Mary was a "nobody" who became greater than everybody, simply because God came to her and she responded in the humblest way possible. She reasoned, she doubted, she surrendered, and she connected with others. We can all do this, too.

This sermon is inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 189-205.

The Courage of Mary

Sunday, July 13, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Luke 1:26-45

In this final sermon we'll consider the story of the annunciation: the angelic announcement to Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah. This account is not, strictly speaking, an event in the life of Jesus, for it happens prior to his birth. But I chose to examine it because Mary is much like us: she has not yet met the earthly Jesus, but she receives a message about him, and she responds. Her response to the gospel message – who Jesus is and what he will do – can inform and guide us in our own walk with Jesus.

We begin with "who" Jesus is. The angel calls him "the Son of the Most High." In ancient terms, you could be called a son of someone if you resembled or believed strongly in that person. But here, the title "Son of the Most High" means much more than that Jesus was simply a follower of God, because the angel adds, "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever." And then, perhaps because he knows that Mary can't believe her ears, he clarifies things by saying, "His kingdom will never end." There is a promise that this child who is about to be born will not just be a political king, but will have a kingdom that will last forever. The strong implication is that he is more than a mortal human being.

The second thing we learn about him is that his name is Jesus, which means "God who saves." Every founder of every other major religion comes to the world as a guide to show the way of salvation. None would ever claim to be God or even a redeemer or a savior. But the Bible says Jesus is the way of salvation – living the life you should live and even dying the death you should die for your sins. So, in the very name of this child, we see the uniqueness of Christianity in general and of Jesus in particular.