

The Example of Mary's Faith

Our New Testament reading is Luke 1:26-38, regarding the appearance of the angel to Mary. In this time and culture, girls typically became engaged at about age 13, and their marriages consummated at approximately age 14. So, most scholars estimate that when the angel visited Mary, she was between 13 and 15. Try to imagine with me, with a fresh sense of wonder, what an impact this angelic visitation must have had upon this young peasant girl.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants have not treated Mary appropriately. We Protestants don't venerate her or pray to or through her, or even name our churches after her, but Mary is indeed worthy of our regard. The evidence of Scripture is that Mary was a godly young woman of moral purity when she was approached by the angel Gabriel. God in his foreknowledge chose Mary as a faithful steward of the overwhelming responsibility for the care and upbringing of Jesus, whom she understood to be the Messiah of God. For many years she struggled with her times of doubt about Jesus' unique role, but remained a faithful follower when Jesus began his public ministry. Mary wasn't perfect, but she was a disciple and Luke records in Acts 1:14 that Mary was with the other disciples in the Upper Room, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Because Mary was very human, and not divine, she's for us a fitting example in her faith as an experience of growth.

God comes to the least suspecting because grace works in the hearts of those who have no claim upon him. God cannot give to those whose hands are already full of their own goodness and proud accomplishments. He comes to those prepared to receive him through their own sense of need and unworthiness. God brought this gracious appearance to Mary when she was totally unsuspecting and dependent on God's goodness. And that's the way he may visit you as well. Mary wondered at this word of grace which was a surprising and awesome word. The undeserved yet desperately needed work of God in our behalf always appears great to us.

Gabriel told Mary that she was favored. Certainly we wish to honor Mary as one of the great servants of the Lord, who played an important and unique role in salvation history. Yet the theme of our text is the greatness of God's grace. Mary was godly and devout, yet she was not chosen

based on her merits, but simply by grace alone. Like you and me, she was undeserving and had done nothing nor could she do anything to earn God's favor. The angel continued to explain how the favor of God would give her the privilege of bearing the Holy Spirit-conceived Son of God.

Grace never comes to those of us who think we're deserving. It's always beyond our grasp or our power to earn. Our efforts at earning God's favor always come up short. As Mary continued to wonder, she asked, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She wasn't expressing disbelief, but rather wonder at the ways of God. Then the angel answered her question by saying that her miraculous, virgin conception would take place by the Holy Spirit. The angel reminded Mary that nothing is impossible with God. Faith that allows for God to rescue us is faith that focuses on his power and not on what we can do to save ourselves. I doubt if any come to saving faith without this sense of wonder and awe before the majesty of God. Perhaps this is part of what Jesus meant when he said that "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mk. 10:15).

The power for deliverance and a new life is the same power that created the heavens and the earth; that conceived the Son of God within Mary; that accomplished our atonement with God through Christ's death on the cross; and that raised Christ Jesus from the dead on Easter morning (Eph. 1:19-20). The argument is one from greater to the lesser. If God's power has accomplished these things, how much more can we trust that his power will change our eternal destiny and even now, our very character? Nothing is impossible with God. God continues to strengthen our faith and even accommodates us during times of weakness. His grace sustains and encourages us as with Mary. Throughout her life Mary no doubt wondered at the awesome grace, power and adequacy of God in her life.

I think of the Christmas song by John Jacob Niles (I first heard this song when Niles accompanied himself on his guitar in chapel where I was a college student):

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
That Jesus the Savior should come for to die,
For poor ornery sinners like you and like I.
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," was her response. For Mary to become the mother of Jesus, for her to experience within her womb the miracle of the virgin conception, she had to simply receive the work of grace, first through trusting. It's probably impossible for us to fully appreciate what a miracle of grace it was for this young girl Mary to trust in this word from the angel. We have millennia of church history and theology to fall back upon, but this announcement from the angel would have been contrary to all previous human experience and reason. For her to receive this miracle, she needed to trust the word of God, which is faith. She surrendered.

Brennan Manning says we're called to surrender and not just to submit. Jesus submitted to the soldiers who came to arrest him; but he surrendered to the loving Father, whom he trusted would raise him triumphantly.

Of herself, Mary would not have the faith to trust the word of God. No doubt Mary was of a humble yet devout upbringing, and was acquainted with the Scriptures that promised the Messiah, who would deliver his people from their sins. Yet the word of God is more than just a dead letter, but accompanied by the Spirit of God becomes alive. The Holy Spirit touched her heart as one who was chosen in Christ “before the creation of the world” (Eph.1:4). She had not sought God. He sought her and drew her to himself and gave Mary grace to believe. Only grace could have enabled Mary to believe in the miracle of the virgin conception of the Son of God. To me, even physical birth is a miracle.

The virginal conception of Jesus is one of the miracles frequently debunked by naturalist theologians, who may also aver that to believe in a supernatural birth minimizes the incarnation of Christ, that Jesus could not have been fully human if he were not conceived as we are. But if we believe in the Grand Miracle, as CS Lewis called it, that Jesus was fully God and fully man, his miraculous conception is a “logical,” even essential corollary. In Christ’s conception, God was “invading” humankind as a new creation, one who could share every type of human experience and temptation, yet also remained the sinless Savior whose death would be the perfect sacrifice (e.g. Heb. 4:14ff). Jesus walked among us, sharing every experience, trial and human emotion, and suffered on the cross as no one has ever suffered. Yet his life and brief ministry was marked, from start to finish, with miracles of compassion and power and with insight and wisdom beyond comprehension (Jn. 7:15). (Yes, one can believe in the virginal conception without being a Docetic!)

Mary had grace to believe that the eternal Son of the Most High would be conceived miraculously, and be born as a helpless infant, in primitive and crude conditions. The Son of God, the Savior of the world, would in his incarnation need the care, protection and provisions of his peasant parents!

The Son of God was to be conceived within Mary’s womb by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:35). She had nothing to do with Jesus’ conception, except to be the vessel in which the Holy Spirit would work.

John seems to have this miracle of conversion in mind when he writes in his prologue to the gospel that, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn. 1:12-13).

We aren’t Christians because of our heritage or any natural goodness or ability. Nor are we excluded from faith and from inclusion in God’s family because of our lack of spiritual or religious pedigree. If that had been God’s way, he would have chosen the betrothed wife of a high priest and/or ruler of the Sanhedrin. But instead, God chose a young girl bereft of credentials. Apart from faith, church rituals and routines mean nothing to God, who knows the heart and is seeking those who will be open to a personal, life-changing relationship and a life of discipleship.

Mary was willing to believe, trust and obey the word of the Lord (Lk. 1:38, 45). She trusted everything she knew about God with everything she had to offer him. Her faith would grow and mature the more she pondered in her heart (Lk. 2:19). But God had already begun to do his good work in her, which he would bring to completion (Phil.1:6). Her submitting to God’s work of

grace involved also her obeying. Young Mary's response was one of complete obedience: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

And obeying for Mary would involve growing in grace, a life of continual trust and obedience and growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). At the time of the angel's announcement to her, Mary had no way of knowing how costly grace would be in her life. Throughout her spiritual pilgrimage, Mary experienced the adequacy of God's grace. Her life would not be easy.

When Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple for his circumcision and ritual purification, they were met by the devout Simeon and Anna, aged prophets who recognized the baby Jesus as the fulfillment of their messianic hopes. Simeon prophesied to Mary that "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Lk. 2:35). Mary likely remembered this prophecy as she stood at the foot of the cross, as her Son was crucified for her and for all the sins of the world (Jn. 19:25-27). She would need to grow in grace to face the challenges that lay ahead for her. She would face misunderstandings and disbelief of her conception and pregnancy as a virgin, by her pledged husband-to-be and by all the people who knew her. Apart from God's intervention and protection, as when the angel explained Mary's condition to Joseph, her life would have been in danger and certainly ruined (Matt. 1:18-25),

As one commentator wrote, "A young unmarried girl who became pregnant risked disaster. Unless the father of the child agreed to marry her, she would probably remain unmarried for life. If her own father rejected her, she could be forced into begging or prostitution in order to earn her living. And Mary, with her story about being made pregnant by the Holy Spirit, risked being considered crazy as well. Still Mary said, despite the possible risks, "Let it be with me according to your word." Being the mother of the Messiah would not be an easy road for Mary. And the life of grace and obedience doesn't mean our lives will be easy. The life of faith inevitably leads to surrender to the way of the cross. As Jesus faced the cross, his struggle moved from submission to full surrender to the purpose of the Triune God (Lk. 22:42, etc.).

The miracle of faith changes your life immediately, but also takes place over time. As a diamond is forged through centuries of intense pressure, so is the character of Christlikeness forged through times and years of struggle of soul and spiritual warfare. Most children are assessed by how much they resemble their parents. But, because of the Holy Spirit who would fill Mary's life, she would become like the Son whom she carried within her womb.

This is the ongoing miracle of faith, Mary's faith, believing the impossible that happened *for us* and that takes place *within us*. Just as Mary's virginal conception and faith to believe were miracles, so is our conversion. Only a work of grace can move our hearts to believe and forge in us over the years of time the character of Christlikeness. If the Holy Spirit has begun a work in you, you're experiencing the same power that shaped the universe and that raised Jesus from the grave. Don't allow this Christmas Season to slip away without experiencing the miracle of faith that brings a changed life and everlasting destiny.