

**Series: Joy in the Journey**

**Today: Mary—the mother of Jesus**

**Text: Luke 1:26-38**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, December 20, 2009 (Fourth Sunday in Advent  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

It is the fourth Sunday in Advent. We have lit the final candle of our waiting time, and now we count down to Christmas. So I ask you again: How is your waiting time? Will you be ready to hear the good news we have to share on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day?

One of the parents in our congregation has been trying to help her children understand Advent and the need for waiting. They have been lighting the Advent Wreath candles every night and participating in the liturgy. She sent me a cute story last week that she had found in a magazine that talks about this ritual. The author tells of asking her children what the four candles of Advent represent, and her seven year old son said with some pride, *"There's love, joy, peace, and ... and ..."* As her son stumbled on the final candle, her six year old daughter was eager to keep up with her brother, so she eagerly broke in and said excitedly, *"I know! I know! Peace and quiet!"* [Source: Michelle Hardie, Holland, MI. *Today's Christian Woman*, "Heart to Heart."]

If I don't get to speak to you personally, either today, on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas Day, allow me to wish you a Blessed Christmas filled with all that the candles of Advent represent: hope, joy, peace and love; and perhaps a little peace and quiet, too.

This morning, as we continue journeying in faith with the heroes and heroines of the Bible, we turn to the journey of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her role in the birth of Jesus is obviously critical. When the Almighty, All Powerful, All Knowing God chose to come to us in a form we could understand as a human being, he had to choose someone who would be the parents of this child, and God chose well when God chose Mary and Joseph. Both of them were

willing to accept the message of the Angel Gabriel that something mysterious and supernatural was involved in the conception and birth of their son. Both of them agreed on the name given by the angel--Jesus; the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua which means *the Lord Saves*.

This morning I would like us to focus on three statements in our text from Luke's story as a way to understand Mary's journey of faith: 1) The Name Gabriel Calls Her; 2) The Question She Asks; 3) The Faithfulness She Offers.

### **THE NAME GABRIEL CALLS MARY**

I have read this passage every year at Christmas, but this year the first thing that jumped out at me was the name which Gabriel uses to address Mary. He doesn't call her by name. He calls her by the qualities which God sees in her. The New Revised Standard Version translates the address of Gabriel this way: *Greetings, favored one!* Eugene Peterson translates it this way: *Good morning! You are beautiful with God's beauty; beautiful inside and out.*

I think what impressed me is that when Gabriel speaks to Mary, he speaks a word of affirmation. He tells her "*God favors you. God sees you as beautiful inside and out.*"

Oh that we could all have the vision of Gabriel when we speak God's truth to other people! Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could look through the crusty exterior of defenses that all of us use to protect ourselves and speak God's truth to them; that they are beautiful inside and out?

Cherie and I still try to go to the movies every Friday, and a few weeks ago we saw a movie that didn't last long in our Lancaster theaters. It was entitled *Precious*, and it was about a young woman who had been sexually abused by her father and had given birth to two children because of her father's incest. This young woman's mother not only failed to protect her. She

blamed her for stealing her husband's affection. Not only was Precious sexually abused by her father. She was verbally abused by her mother, and that led her to see herself as worthless.

It was a painful movie to watch, and some critics felt it did not have a redeeming message, but Cherie and I disagree. The redeeming message in the movie was in the relationship between Precious and her General Education Degree teacher. She is one of those women who we need to celebrate. For each of her students, she looks beneath the surface and speaks to the person who is hidden by years of abuse, ridicule and neglect. She sees her students as precious in the sight of God and challenges them to become all that God created them to be.

In the end, Precious finds the courage to leave her abusive home. She achieves her general education degree. She claims her children, and she begins a new life away from the abuse she has received all of her life.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you and I could see those who need God's grace through the eyes of a Gabriel and remind them that they are beautiful with God's beauty; inside and out?

### **THE QUESTION MARY ASKS**

The second thing that impressed me was Mary's curiosity. She is told the impossible is going to happen, and she isn't afraid to question God: *How can this be?* Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were as comfortable as Mary in being honest with the questions raised when we are seeking to be a person of faith?

Mary seriously questions Gabriel about what he was telling her. His message was that she would become pregnant by the power of God and the child would be the promised messiah. *How can this be?* It is a tale which is so incredible that it demanded that Mary ask the question. How can it be that she can have a baby without ever having sexual relations with a man?

If you have ever questioned the doctrine of the virgin birth, you are not alone. Mary was the first one to raise your question for you: *How can this be?*

The virgin birth has never been an essential doctrine of the Christian faith, and yet it is clearly important to the majority of people in our culture. In a recent poll taken by Barna Research Group, 75% of those who responded said they believed that it was true.

William Barclay reminds us that in Jewish tradition it is held that in the birth of every child there are three partners—the father, the mother and the Spirit of God. Jews believed that no child could ever be born without the Spirit of God being active. And it may well be that the New Testament stories of the birth of Jesus are lovely, poetical ways of saying that even if Jesus had a human father, the Holy Spirit was operative in his birth in a unique way.

The Hebrew word in the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14) which is translated as virgin literally means “a young woman;” a young woman shall conceive and bear a son. Matthew and Luke are the only two places where the virgin birth is mentioned. The rest of the New Testament is silent on this issue. So what are we to do with this doctrine which has been the cause for many thinking people to reject the story of the birth of Jesus?

At our Early Word Bible Study the other morning our Parish Associate, Gary Meier, had a good word for me to hear. He said, *“It’s a shame that so many people get caught up in the “how” of the birth of Jesus and miss the “who.”* Perhaps we have been so focused how Jesus was conceived that we forget who he was and why his life is so important.

I love the words of Frederick Buechner on the subject: *“The earliest of the four Gospels makes no reference to it, and neither does Paul, who wrote earlier still. On later evidence, however, many Christians have made it an article of faith that it was the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph who got Mary pregnant. If you believe that God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn’t*

*make much difference to you how he got there. If you don't believe, it should make less difference still. In either case, life is complicated enough without confusing theology and gynecology.*" [Source: Wishful Thinking, p. 94]

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of us had the faith of a Mary who felt secure enough to take her deepest questions to God?

### **THE FAITHFULNESS MARY OFFERS**

The final statement Mary makes demonstrates her faithfulness. She does not try to change God's mind. She does not argue with God's purpose. She simply says, *Let it be to me according to your word.*"

Years ago, Dave Phillips and his wife, Lynn, had a talk about the callings they felt God was stirring in them. As they discussed what they were most passionate about, they agreed that bringing relief to suffering children and reaching the next generation with the gospel were at the top of the list. The thought of starting a relief agency was considered, but Dave's response was, "But that would mean I have to talk in front of people." By nature, Dave is a very quiet, behind-the-scenes man.

However, after much prayer, Dave set aside his fears, and he and Lynn started Children's Hunger Fund out of their garage. Six weeks after CHF was launched, in January of 1992, he received a phone call from the director of a cancer treatment center in Honduras asking if there was any way he could obtain a certain drug for seven children who would die without it. Dave wrote down the name of the drug and told the director that he had no idea how to get this type of drug. They then prayed over the phone and asked God to provide.

As Dave hung up the phone, before he even let go of the receiver, the phone rang again. It was a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey asking Dave if he would have any use for

48,000 vials of *that exact drug!* Not only did they offer him eight million dollars' worth of this drug, but they told him they would airlift it anyplace in the world! Dave would later learn that the company was one of only two that manufactured this particular drug in the United States.

Within forty-eight hours, Dave had the drug sent to the treatment center in Honduras and to twenty other locations as well. It was only after he believed that God was at work, before he had evidence to confirm it, that he was affirmed in his calling to this ministry. [Source: *Francis Chan, Forgotten God (David C. Cook, 2009), pp. 135-136*]

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, like Mary, we could believe in the power of God to work through us even before we have the tangible evidence of what God will do?

### **Conclusion**

There are three things to remember about Mary's journey of faith which can instruct our own journey of faith. First, the name Gabriel called her: Favored One—beautiful inside and out. It is the name God calls us and encourages us to call others. Second, the questions that Mary asked show us that our questions ought not to distance us from God. They can be the vehicles through which we can come to a deeper faith in God's power and authority. Finally, the faithfulness which Mary demonstrates is a witness to all of us that God will use us and our witness to bring hope to the world.

Thanks be to God for the journey of Mary!