

## MARY'S TRUST IN GOD

Luke 1:26-38

### INTRODUCTION

It might seem strange to start thinking about Christmas a week before Advent officially begins. Usually today is the final Sunday to think about other ways of God's involvement in our lives. For instance, in many churches, today is considered "Christ the King" Sunday.

But the expensive, colourful inserts in our newspapers about all the gift possibilities for the "holiday season" (make that Christmas) tell me our culture has wanted us not only to think about Christmas but to do something – which means buy their stuff -- since right after Halloween.

I know many are focused on all they still have to do to be ready for Christmas. Right? Actually, if the truth be told, we are not as much focused as we are in a blur over everything that's spinning out of control. If we are not careful, we can begin to feel guilty because our Christmas cards aren't in the mail and all our shopping and baking isn't done. Our celebrations may be more exasperations than joy-filled occasions. Yet, we don't *have* to give in.

Throughout December, we'll be working together as a church to slow down, keep our focus on what is most central, follow through on what's most important, and experience a meaningful Christmas celebration no matter what our circumstances.

To help us in this process, I hope you will find the worship services filled with encouragement and hope so that this Christmas will be one you have always longed for. Also, starting next week you will find an extra insert in the bulletin with some easy to use, practical suggestions for turning your celebration into a meaningful and God-honouring Christmas experience.

Let us take a moment to pray....Amen.

In the Scripture reading from Luke, we heard about the angel Gabriel's appearance before a young teen-age, Jewish peasant girl named Mary. The angel announced to her that she was going to be the mother of a holy child, who would be called the Son of God.

Mary was startled and wondered aloud how such a thing could be possible. Although she was engaged to a man named Joseph, she was still a virgin. The angel told her she would be made pregnant by God's Holy Spirit. Gabriel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. . . . For God can do anything."

God can do anything. Indeed! Not only would a pregnancy happen to Mary, but what about how Joseph would surely react to her being pregnant. The astonishing explanation was that God's Spirit would be the cause. Who would believe that reason? According to Jewish Law, she would be considered an adulteress and possibly be stoned to death. If that didn't happen, she and her child would no doubt experience the shame in her community for the rest of their lives.

But as far as this trusting teenager was concerned, all of this was for God to handle. Ultimately, for Mary, it all came down to doing what she believed God wanted her to do. So she said to Gabriel, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say" The basic issue was settled for Mary. She trusted God.

I want to ask two questions of the story before us this morning: What was God doing here? And what did God see in Mary that He would want her for His purposes? I'll spend only a few moments on the first question, but I will linger a little longer on the second.

**First, what was God doing here?** Well, in simple terms, God entered into human history in the human life of Jesus. The child would be born of woman – thus he would be fully human. The child would also be born of God's Holy Spirit – hence, he would also be fully divine. That is the mystery of Jesus Christ for us to ponder – the mystery of the beginning -- at the moment of Jesus' conception.

Now I do understand our current difficulty with the mere notion of a Virgin Birth. How could such a thing happen? And it is quite true we don't see anything like this occurring in normal, human experience. But I wonder if we are missing the real point. Let me offer for our consideration the following thought: the miracle of the Virgin Birth rests on an even greater and deeper mystery. And it is this: that God Himself has entered our human plane of existence – our human reality. And God began His entrance as an infant.

If we continue along this line of thought, it is not unrealistic then to affirm that God could choose to enter our level of existence at the most basic human level -- an embryo implanted within Mary's uterus.

The miracle of the Virgin Birth rests upon the mystery of God's taking on human form in Jesus – what the church calls the Incarnation. Next to that mystery, the question of how a virgin could conceive fades into the background, doesn't it? You see, the grand miracle is the mystery that God took on human flesh. What God did at the beginning of creation, when the Holy Spirit hovered over the watery chaos and spoke the universe into existence, was not much different than what He did when the Holy Spirit came over Mary. In her child – in Jesus -- a new creation was begun.

And this Jesus came for the salvation of all humankind. I truly wonder then, if the question of how a virgin could give birth is the most important question to ask. In John's Gospel we take note: "The Word -- being Jesus -- became flesh and dwelt among us." So the real question is: "How – and when -- did God become a human being and live among us?"

So, when God wanted to enter human history for the purpose of saving, not condemning humanity, **what qualities did God see in Mary that He chose her for His purposes?**

I want to suggest three qualities in Mary that delighted God. Three remarkable qualities of receptivity, humility and service. These shone through her, especially in her experience and response with Gabriel.

**The first quality: God saw in Mary receptivity -- an amazing openness to hear God.** Does that seem too obvious to you? Like so many things that are obvious, it can be so basic that it's overlooked. Clearly Mary was receptive. What I find so fascinating about her though is that she was not surprised that God was speaking to her or that an angel appeared to her. Rather she was startled at what she heard -- that is what disturbed her the most.

She wasn't like Zechariah in the early part of Luke Chapter 1, who was terrified at seeing an angel. Mary seemed able to accept Gabriel's appearance. It was what she heard that shook her. Even though she was at first troubled and wondered what all this meant, Mary was nonetheless

open to hearing from God. And therefore she would also be open to bear God's Son in her young body.

Really, it isn't very different for us today. To hear God, we must be open to listen and receive [and believe]. God will come to us by His grace – that's God part. Our part is to be open and receptive. We cannot make God happen in our lives. We can only be open to receive. Jesus said God's Spirit was like the wind that blows where and when it wants to. The wind of God's Spirit cannot be controlled or predicted. The best we can do is to keep our sails spread out to catch the wind of the Spirit when the Spirit blows.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc is always hearing voices from God, and the king is angered by this. He complains to her, "Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't your voices come to me? I'm the king, not you."

"They do come," she replied. "But you do not hear them. You've not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings, you cross yourself and have done with it. But if you prayed from your heart and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

How might we become receptive people? Here are three things to think about.

**First, why not ask God to help us be receptive.** Even receptivity is something we cannot make happen for ourselves. It is a gift from God. If we're willing to let God create that grace in our lives, then let's ask Him to do it. If we're not sure we are willing, then perhaps we can at least ask God to help us be willing. The gift of God's Spirit is not something you and I can make happen. The quality of receptivity is something God's Spirit creates in us when we are willing.

**Second, if we're to become receptive people, we need to be willing to be interrupted.** God will not fit into schedules we make for Him. God will not be restricted to Sunday morning. If God we are not open to God meeting us on His terms and in His time and interrupting our schedules, then I wonder if we will be around and available when God wants to meet with us – when God wants to have a wonderful, serendipity experience with us.

This can get very practical. Jesus said we meet God when we meet our neighbour's needs. Jesus said feeding the hungry and clothing the naked is the same as feeding and clothing Him. If we have no time to receive our neighbour, we don't have time to receive God. If little children and the lonely neighbour next door cannot interrupt us, the chances are God will not interrupt us either.

**Third, receptive people have an attitude of expectancy.** We can expect God to make Himself known to us. Jesus said in John chapter 14 that when we love him, he will reveal himself to us. We cannot control how or when God will reveal Himself to us, but we can trust and wait expectantly. One of Jesus' favourite expressions was "If you have ears, then hear." So listen! Keep your eyes open! Expect! When you come to worship, expect God to meet you here. When you read the Scripture in your private, quiet time, expect God to meet you there.

God chose Mary because she was receptive. **God also saw in Mary the marvellous quality of humility.** Remember -- Mary's surprise was not so much that God had something to say to her, but she was surprised by what it was she heard.

Gabriel said "Greetings, the Lord has blessed you and is with you." Or as another translation put it: "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." That's what troubled Mary - that exalted salutation. Why should she be spoken to with those words? Why was she so highly favoured? Then Gabriel explained to her what was going to happen -- how she would conceive a child as a virgin. Even though this would risk her reputation and perhaps even her life, Mary could only respond with "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say!"

Medieval artists often portrayed Mary in stained glass windows. Her window would be the only one with no colour on it. Clear glass. All the other window panes would filter the light of the sun through their own distinctive designs. They portrayed Mary as clear, unfiltered. There was nothing of herself to affect the light that came through. In her humility she knew she could not advance herself and also advance the work of God.

Can anyone know better than a mother what it means to stop advancing herself? A mother's entire body adjusts itself to the necessities of childbirth. From the moment of conception, her body is no longer her own. There's a letting go of personal sovereignty in the bearing of children. And in a way this is comparable to the life of God in our lives. It means we need to step back and appreciate/enjoy playing second fiddle [to God].

Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once asked, "What is the hardest instrument to play?"

Without a moment's hesitation, he replied: "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that's a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony."

Musically and spiritually speaking, our life with God is not to be sung in unison. Our life together is not to be sung in unison, but in harmony. In wonderfully moving harmonies.

Frankly, can we ever truly imagine what it must have meant for Mary to be told by God that she would be blessed with a child, not of her own choosing and not in her own time? Could any of us accept that? Only the humble can, I believe. Only those who know they are not their own but belong to and are loved by God can be that accepting.

**There is one more quality I believe God saw in Mary – her willingness to serve.** God was delighted to use Mary in a special way for His purposes because she had a serving heart. I appreciate Eugene Peterson's way of expressing being a servant in *The Message*. Mary said, "I am the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say."

Ready to serve! A remarkable quality. This meant she [her body] was not her own. Her reputation was not her own. Her future was not her own.

Ready to serve! I have used this story before but it illustrates so well being ready to serve. In Portland, Oregon, the homeless gather under the Burnside Bridge. For more than three years, carloads of Christians from Bridgetown Ministries have shown up on Friday nights and served these men and women. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves and haircuts, some of the volunteers wash the homeless people's feet. A writer for *USA Today* called it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed."

This group of society's outcasts had their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt."

The reporter commented on the significance of this foot washing: "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling."

It is our readiness to serve that will make it possible for us to see what it is God wants us to do. It was Mary's servant's heart that set her apart in the eyes of God and made it possible for him to speak to her as he did. It is the servant's heart in each of us that will be able to hear the voice of God.

Mary was receptive. Mary was humble. Mary had a servant's heart. Like mother, like Son! Or, better: like Son, like mother! Mary's trust in God is an example we ignore to our disadvantage. We who come after her can learn to follow God as she did. She exemplifies the mystery that God chooses to accomplish his work -- his purposes in history -- through people young like Mary -- or old like her relative Elizabeth -- weak in human eyes yet strong in God's eyes. God chooses to use the willing who choose Him.

I wonder if we understand the awesome event that happened in human history because of the choice, the decision, the answer Mary gave to God through Gabriel.

I have in my library a little book of character sketches [Frederick Buechner] of some of the people in the Bible. Let me conclude this morning with the sketch about the angel Gabriel encountering Mary:

She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."

In the book, there's a picture of Gabriel above that brief description. He's viewed from the rear. His hands are behind his back, and his fingers are crossed.

Jesus said that the angels of heaven rejoice when a person comes to repentance. That suggests the inhabitants in heaven are keeping a close watch on us, the inhabitants of earth. We are under surveillance. I wonder (I think I wonder a lot these days) -- maybe all of heaven is standing on its tiptoes to see what you and I will say in response to the call of God on our lives.

The whole future of the world may not hinge on our answers, but who knows?

Certainly our own futures hinge on them. I don't know what God is asking us to do personally. But let us all listen and be open to God's interruption in our lives.

**May each of us be open to receive the grace to say, "I am the Lord's person, ready to serve. May it be with me as God has said." Amen.**

Rev. Chris Miller, Oriole-York Mills United Church, November 25, 2007