

Troubling Change
Luke 1:26-38

Mary probably wasn't expecting any more big surprises in life. The biggest question for girls growing up in those times – which man she would marry – had already been answered. Perhaps her father had betrothed her to Joseph without her consent. Or perhaps she had been granted the desire of her heart to marry the man that she loved. But in any event, she would be married, and in the ancient world that meant she would be secure. She would have a husband to protect her, and, God willing, she would have children who would provide for her in her old age. We don't know how Mary felt about the future that stretched out before her, but there didn't seem to be any big mystery about it. Her life would unfold like that of thousands of other Hebrew girls growing up all around her.

But then an angel showed up and rocked her world. Now, we cannot necessarily assume that the angel's appearance was accompanied by spectacular special effects. Sometimes, angels can be mistaken for normal people – Samson's father had to ask an angel who he was. Other times, angels display awesome radiance and glory, as they appeared to the soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb.

So, if the angel's appearance wasn't overwhelming, what was it that troubled Mary so much? It must have been what the angel said to her – that she was highly favored, that the Lord was with her, and that she was blessed among women. Such words would certainly be unusual for any man to say to an ordinary teenage girl, but why would such words of blessing be so troubling to Mary? Probably because the angel's words meant that, somehow, Mary's plans and expectations were about to change in a big way. Somehow, some way, what the angel said meant that Mary wasn't the ordinary girl she had thought herself to be. Even if the changes that were to come would be wonderful, as the angel said they were, his words were still troubling to Mary.

Change is never easy, is it? We especially resist it during this season between Thanksgiving and Christmas, surrounded as we are with so many traditions. We look forward to tasting the same family recipes, to putting up the same decorations, and to watching the same pageants year after year. Even the teenagers who normally listen to hip-hop take their I-Pods out of their ears long enough to sing those old familiar Christmas carols.

And why do we love our traditions so much? Perhaps it's because when the same things happen over and over again, we can cling to the illusion that we are in control. We plan the parties, we arrange the decorations, and we put the rolls in the same place on the table every year and we are just sure that everything will work out the way it always has. And then our friends die unexpectedly, or we spend the holidays in the hospital instead of at the dinners we have prepared. No matter how sturdy our traditions may be, the fact is that none of us are really in charge of anything.

And surely that is one of the central messages of the Christmas story – that God is the One Who is in control of all the events of history. It didn't matter what Mary expected to happen

in her life – God had other plans. She wouldn't just be the wife of a carpenter and have a bunch of kids. She would bear a Son Who would be great, the Son of the Highest. Yes, she would play a part in the working out of God's plans. She would be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah Who would reign on the throne of His father David. And yes, people would still be talking about her and her Son for thousands of years to come. But God was the one who was keeping His ancient promises through Mary. God was the one Who was – and is – in charge.

And in pointing out all these things to Mary, the angel was helping her understand one way that we can all embrace change in our lives – if God is the One Who is in charge, God's plans are always better than our plans. For what human being would ever have dreamed up God's plan to save the world? We would probably have called for the Messiah to come crashing into history in a fiery chariot surrounded by legions of mighty angels – but to have Him born to a teenage virgin in a hick town out on the margins of civilization? Who would have imagined that God Himself in the person of Jesus would solve our sin problem not by scattering our enemies with a sword but by laying down His life on a cross? No, it's no wonder that God told Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."

But if it is hard for us to accept change in our lives, even when we know that God is really in charge of everything that happens to us, it is even harder for us to embrace things that we cannot understand. And let's face it – what this angel told Mary doesn't really make sense to anyone, even after the greatest theologians have spent 2000 years trying to figure it out. It's hard enough to imagine how a virgin could have a child – that flies in the face of everything we know about biology and anatomy. To our understanding, it is simply impossible.

But the virgin birth is nothing compared to the way the angel explained how it would happen. Somehow, the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary in such a way that the Baby that would be born to her would be called the Son of God. The child Jesus would thus be distinct from the Holy Spirit and from the Father, and yet would be divine. But at the same time he would be the truly human Son of Mary. How can God exist in three distinct persons? How can Jesus be both God and Man? Like Mary, we don't understand any of this. Oh, we sang about it this morning – how Jesus is God of God and Light of Light and yet He was born of the virgin's womb, how He is the Word of the Father who took on flesh and dwelt among us. We sing about it, but we can't understand any of it. The reality of Jesus is just beyond us.

But perhaps that gives us a clue as to how we can deal with those disturbing changes that come into our lives. When our friends die or when our loved ones become sick, we don't understand what is going on. Even when pleasant surprises come our way, we can't always explain why things work out the way they do – why do the cancer numbers go down? With unemployment so high, why did that perfect job in that perfect place materialize? The angel didn't really explain the birth of Jesus either. He just said, "With God, nothing shall be impossible." In the face of our impossible situations, we can take comfort in those words. No problem is too difficult for our God to solve.

But the angel did give Mary something concrete, something tangible, a sign to bolster her faith. The angel pointed out that God had already done another miraculous work – giving

Mary's cousin Elizabeth a child in her old age. The implication is clear – if God could make it possible for a woman past child-bearing age to have a child, surely He could do what He had promised Mary He would do.

Throughout the Scriptures, God provides such signs to help His people trust in Him. Moses' staff became a serpent as much to build his own faith as to challenge the pride of Pharaoh. Gideon tested the truth of God's words with fleeces that were alternately dry or wet with dew. God made the shadow on King Hezekiah's stairs go backward by ten degrees to prove that he would recover from his sickness. And of course Jesus showed His disciples numerous signs of His power, from walking on the water and calming the storms with a word, to healing the sick and casting out demons. All these miracles continue to bolster our own faith, as we meditate on the might and majesty of our God.

And can't we all give testimony to miraculous events in our own lives? No, I doubt any of us have seen someone walking on the water. But what made that medical student just happen to be driving by on a rural Alabama road when my mom had been injured in an automobile accident? If he hadn't performed first aid, she wouldn't have lived, and neither my brother nor I would have been born. Was that just luck? Or was it just another demonstration that nothing is impossible for God?

So, when we look at the Elizabeths of the world, when we think about the many times that miraculous power has been displayed in the Scriptures, in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones, we can use those proofs of God's power as fuel for our faith. We can remember the ways that God has demonstrated His love and His power in the past, and that can increase our certainty that God will bless us and our loved ones in similar ways in the future. Knowing that nothing is impossible for God is an essential element in a life of faith. Mary knew that.

But she also knew that such knowledge is not sufficient. It wasn't enough for Mary to know what God was going to do in her life, even if she couldn't understand it. It wasn't even enough for Mary to admit that God was the One Who was in charge of her life, and that He could change all her plans whenever He wished. No, the real challenge for Mary is the same challenge that faces us in the face of change – to submit herself joyfully to God's power, to embrace God's sovereignty in her life, to put her trust in God's love. Mary expressed that trust in God with those amazing words: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

Yes, you heard that right. Mary didn't say, "Be it unto me according to my word." She didn't insist on her own plans. She didn't try to maintain the fiction of some sort of control over the events of her life. She completely abandoned herself to God, even though such abandonment would mean radical change, and even though she couldn't understand anything God was getting ready to do. She put herself completely in God's hands.

And what was the result? Of course, the birth of Jesus brought her a lot of happy moments. What indescribable joy she must have felt as He grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. And of course Mary went through a lot of heartache. She lived to see her Son rejected by His own people, and nailed to a cruel cross. I suppose every mother can relate to these sorts of ups and downs, even if not to the same degree.

But because Mary was willing to submit herself completely to God, even greater blessings would come to the rest of the world. For the baby born to Mary would be called Jesus – the name means “Yahweh is salvation.” Mary was thus blessed not only to be saved by her own Son, but to play such an important role in God’s plan to save the world. The angel was right - Mary was truly blessed among women.

What about us? In this Christmas season, as we prepare the same family dinners and hear the same carols and see the same pageant and hear the same story, we can go on imagining that we are somehow in control. We can go on trying to understand everything before we will believe it. Or we can trust the God Who is determined to save us, even in ways that we cannot possibly understand. We can trust the God for Whom nothing is impossible. And we can submit ourselves to His will for our lives, even if sins and sorrows grow in this world, even if things have to change for us or for our loved ones. We can bow the knee to Mary’s Son, the Son of David, the Messiah Who even now rules and reigns over all the universe, the King Who will one day come again to live among us.

No, God doesn’t call us to be in control. He doesn’t call us to understand everything. He simply calls us to rejoice in the power and the love of Jesus. So let’s do that as we stand and sing all the stanzas of Joy to the World.