

Faith and Mary

Luke 1:26-38

A virgin having a baby – it's always been hard for people to believe. Back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many so-called scholars relied on their scientific knowledge and said that it was simply impossible. They therefore insisted that today's passage is just a myth, a legend like those that grew up around George Washington and Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone in the years after they died.

In response, orthodox scholars continue to point out that the virgin birth is no more difficult to believe than is the fact that God created the earth, or the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. These scholars insist that all of Jesus' miracles really happened, and that thus that denying the virgin birth of Christ in effect denies the Christian faith.

Of course, there was one person for whom the reality of the virgin birth took absolutely no faith at all – and that person was Mary. Now, of course that wasn't true at first. When Gabriel spoke to her in today's passage, Mary was called to exercise a great amount of what we usually understand faith to be – she had to express mental assent to a particular idea, even if she couldn't understand it. When Gabriel spoke to her, Mary had to accept the truth of his message, the amazing reality that, although she was indeed a virgin, she would in fact bear a son.

And she did exercise that kind of faith. She did believe what Gabriel said. In this way, she stands in marked contrast to Zacharias, who in the first part of this chapter refused to believe that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child in their old age.

But in another sense, Mary was the only person in the world who would need absolutely no faith in the fact of the virgin birth. After all, she knew from experience that she had never been with a man. But as the days wore on, she knew with equal certainty that she had in fact become pregnant.

So what is this faith for which we rightly celebrate Mary? Aside from just assenting to the truth of certain facts, Mary was faithful in a more important way. She was faithful in the sense that she trusted God. And if the fact of the virgin birth was eventually impossible for her to deny, the situation into which this fact placed her couldn't have been more difficult. No, Mary's faith, Mary's trust in God would not be an easy thing for her.

In the first place, it is likely that Mary was little more than a girl. After all, until modern times, it was customary for girls to marry soon after they became physically able to bear children. We can thus assume that Mary was about 15 when she heard Gabriel's news – no wonder she was so troubled and scared.

But even if she had been 25 or 35, what Gabriel told her would have been just as confusing. For there's just no rational way to understand his message. After all, as those faithless scholars continue to insist, it just doesn't make any sort of rational sense for a virgin to be able to have a child.

And what about his statement that Mary's child would be the Son of God? Christians have been arguing about the nature and meaning of the incarnation for years. So how was Mary supposed to understand all that deep theology on the spur of the moment?

But even more difficult for Mary were the social problems that would necessarily follow from Gabriel's message. For whom could she expect to believe her story? What would Joseph say? He could have decided to break off the marriage. According to the Law of Moses, he could even have had her stoned as an adulteress. What would her father say? He could have disowned her for bringing ill repute on his family. Because of Gabriel's message, Mary could easily have found herself becoming an outcast, hated by everyone she loved.

And yet, even though she was afraid, even though she was terribly confused, and even though she knew obedience to God might cost her everything she had, she trusted God. She completely submitted to His will. She called herself, not the Queen of Heaven, but the maidservant, the slave of God. In fact, we might go so far as to say that Mary's single-minded, selfless devotion to God is the true miracle in this story, something even less believable than the virgin birth.

So yes, we have a lot to learn from Mary. Because if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that her situation is not so different from our own. No, I don't mean that God is expecting any of us to transcend the basic rules of biology. And God isn't asking any of us to play such a prominent role in His plan to redeem the human race. I doubt that any of our names will be on the lips of Christians 2000 years from now.

But, just like Mary, don't we face lots of frightening, confusing situations in our lives? And doesn't God constantly ask us to trust Him when things just don't make sense?

Think for example about some of the commandments we find in the Scriptures. I mean, why should God care so much if I misuse His name? Why can't I tell a little white lie if it makes someone else feel good? Do I really have to love my enemies? Why should I keep my marriage vows if I'm not getting the emotional support I need? Why should I take a whole day off every week to worship God? Well, what would Mary tell us? It doesn't have to make sense to you – you just have to submit to God's will.

Or maybe some of God's providences, maybe some of the circumstances in your life aren't making sense to you. Why did I lose my job? Why did my husband or wife walk out on me? Why do I or my loved ones have to go through chronic pain or illness? Why do the ones I care most about have to die? What would Mary tell us? It doesn't have to make sense to you – it's God's plan, not yours. You just have to follow Him, no matter what happens.

Is there anything in your life that is just plain frightening today? Do current events seem to be racing out of control? Do you feel overwhelmed when you contemplate the future? Are you wondering how you will ever manage to get everything done? Are you afraid to reach out because you have been hurt before? What would Mary tell us? Don't worry. Don't be afraid. God knows what He's doing. Trust Him.

Or maybe God is calling you to take some risks for Him. Maybe He's calling you outside of your comfort zone, to witness to a friend, to apologize to someone who has hurt you, to take the initiative to heal a relationship that someone else smashed to pieces. Maybe God's calling you to open yourself up to a new relationship or to move to a new town, or to get more deeply involved in the lives of others. And maybe you are afraid to make these sorts of changes. Maybe you're even afraid to pursue holiness because your friends might think you are weird or call you an extremist. What would Mary say? Give up all you are and all you have to your Lord. Serve Him. Give Him your best, no matter what the cost to you might be.

"Well, that's all very well and good, preacher. It's okay for people like Mary to say those things. She was a giant of faith. I wish I could be like her, but I can't. I'm just not strong enough."

Look, if you are focusing on Mary and her faith, you really haven't heard what she has to say. For remember, the important kind of faith she had wasn't her intellectual assent but her trust. And trust, by definition, is focused not on the self, but on the one who is trusted, on the one who is trustworthy. In other words, Mary is not telling us to admire her faith, or even to look to her in any way. No, she's telling us to look at her God. For if our situations might be somewhat similar in one way or another to Mary's, our God is exactly the same. And what do we learn about our God from this passage?

Perhaps it's not so obvious, but the first thing we learn is that God keeps His promises. Now, of course it's true that in the birth of Jesus Christ God kept a promise He made to David back in II Samuel 7, a promise that one of David's descendants would reign on his throne. But there's a much older promise of God that the birth of Christ kept, a promise that comes from our responsive reading this morning.

Way back in Genesis chapter 3, right after Adam and Eve had first sinned against Him, God promised that the Seed of the Woman would one day crush the head of the serpent. And God has kept that promise in Jesus Christ, the one who was born to a woman but not to a man, the One Who has destroyed the power of sin and death on behalf of all who trust in Him.

And that brings us to the second thing we learn about God – we learn that He is not only our Great Promisekeeper. He is also our Great Savior. We find this truth in the very name of Jesus, which means, “Yahweh is our salvation.”

But if the prophecy God gave to Adam and Eve so many years ago pointed to Jesus as the one who would destroy the results of their sin, it also pointed to the only way that He could do that. For if Jesus would crush the head of the serpent, such a victory would cost Him dearly – the serpent would bruise or crush His heel. Yes, Jesus would destroy the power of Satan, but would Himself die in the process.

But Jesus was not only our great Promisekeeper. He is not only our suffering Savior. He is also our Lord and King. Jesus came to fulfill the reason for which Adam was originally created, to rule and reign over all the earth forever. Yes, Gabriel said that Jesus would reign on the throne of David over the house of Jacob. But Jesus’ kingdom would end up being much vaster than David’s, and Jesus’ reign will be much longer. In fact, Gabriel said that Jesus’ kingdom will never end.

And that is because of what we learn about His mighty power. Gabriel said that although Jesus would be born of Mary, He would also be born of the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus would thus be called the Son of the Highest, the Son of God. And yet He is fully man at the same time. No, none of this makes sense to us, but Gabriel points out that in His mighty power, God is not bound by human logic. Nothing is impossible for God.

So, even in the midst of all our confusion and all our problems, shouldn’t all this be reason enough for us to trust God as much as Mary did? If God is faithful, how can He ever go back on His promises to welcome us and to love us and to protect us? If God is our Savior, if He would send His only Son into the world to die for us, how can we doubt that He will meet all our other needs? If God is our King, is there any problem we have that could be beyond His jurisdiction? If God is almighty, if Jesus is able to be the Son of God and the Son of Mary at the same time, could any of our problems be too difficult for Him to solve? Can anything be too hard for Him?

But this story tells us one more thing about God. It gives us one more reason to trust God in the way that Mary did. For here we also learn that God is a God of love and grace. He is a God Who brings new life into a virgin’s womb. He is a God Who brings powerful, selfless faith into a young girl’s heart. So surely, such a God is not just able to calm our fears, to soothe our hurts, and to wipe away every tear from our eyes. Surely He is also willing to come into our lives as He came into Mary’s life, willing to fill our hearts with His Spirit of life and love, of joy and peace.

Surely such a God is worthy of our trust. Yes, trusting God may involve some risk – it certainly did for Mary. No, trusting God won’t always make sense for us – it certainly didn’t for Mary. But knowing God as we know Him, knowing His faithfulness and His forgiveness, knowing His majesty, His might, and His mercy, can we doubt that following Him, that letting Him have His way with us as Mary did, will also bring us great blessings?