

Faith and Mary  
Luke 1:26-38

Why is this simple story so hard for some people to accept? Back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bible scholars hotly debated the truth of these verses. Some appealed to scientific knowledge and said that the story of the virgin birth was simply unbelievable. They said that this was 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.

Others retorted that the virgin birth was no more difficult to believe than was the fact that God created the earth, or the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. They insisted that all of Jesus' miracles were true, and said that those who would deny the miraculous stories contained in the Bible had in effect denied the Christian faith.

Of course, there was one person who knew with every fiber of her being that the virgin birth was no myth, one person for whom the fact of the virgin birth was as undeniable as the existence of gravity – and that person was Mary.

Now, of course that wasn't true at first. When Gabriel spoke to her in today's passage, Mary did indeed have to exercise what we usually understand faith to be – she had to express mental assent to the truth of a particular idea. When Gabriel spoke to her, Mary had to accept the truth of his message, that, although she was a virgin, she would in fact bear a son.

And she did exercise such intellectual faith. She did believe that what Gabriel said was true. 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. Later in this chapter, it is recorded that Mary went to see Elizabeth, who commended Mary for believing what the Lord had told her.

But in another sense, Mary 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 could not deny that she had in fact become pregnant with Jesus.

So what is this faith for which we celebrate Mary? Aside from just assenting to the truth of certain facts, Mary was faithful in a more important sense. 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 was hard. Mary's trust in God would not be an easy thing for her.

So, why was having such a miracle baby so hard for her? Well, the whole thing was pretty scary. After all, 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

imagine Mary to be about 15 – no wonder she was so troubled, so frightened when the angel Gabriel appeared to her.

But even if she had been 25 or 35, the news that Gabriel brought to her would still have been bewildering. There's just no rational way to understand his message. It just doesn't make sense for a virgin to be able to have a child. And we always tend to be afraid of what we can't understand, right?

Oh, and what about all that stuff about the child being the Son of God? Christians have been arguing about the nature and meaning of the incarnation for years – how was Mary supposed to understand all that deep theology on the spur of the moment?

But even more frightening for Mary were the social problems that would necessarily follow from Gabriel's message. Who else would 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 foreseen 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. Mary's single-minded, selfless devotion to God is the true miracle in this story. Given the natural sinful state of mankind, it is frankly a much bigger miracle than the virgin birth.

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. Oh, I know 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 it's easy for us to sympathize with Mary when we look at the things in our life that trouble us. For we all know what it is like to be afraid, to be confused. There are lots of things in all our lives that just don't make sense.

Think about God's commandments, for example. Why should God care so much if I misuse His name? Why can't I tell a lie even 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 just don't make 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 the events of your life 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 broken relationship when you have been hurt, to make a job change, to open yourself up, to get more involved in the lives of others. Maybe you are afraid to change your lifestyle, 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.

Well, that's all very well and good, preacher. It's okay for people like Mary to say those things. She is 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 intellectual assent but 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 be in awe of her faith. She's telling us to be in awe of her God. For if our situations are somewhat similar 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. Of course in the birth of Jesus Christ God kept His promise to David that one of his 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 would destroy the power of sin and death on behalf of all who would trust in Him.

And that brings us to the second thing we learn about God – we learn that He is our Savior. His very name is 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 way that He would do that. For Jesus would be the

One who would crush the head of the serpent, but only at great cost to Himself – the serpent would bruise or crush His heel. Jesus would destroy the power of Satan, but would Himself die in the process.

But Jesus was not only our suffering Savior. He is 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. Gabriel said that Jesus would reign on the throne of David over the house of Jacob. But Jesus' kingdom would be much vaster than David's, and Jesus reign will be much longer. In fact, Gabriel said that Jesus' kingdom would 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. As we sang this morning, He is very God, truly God, begotten of the Father, not created. 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.

And 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? God is faithful – do you think He will ever go back on His promises to welcome us and to love us and to protect us? 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? God is our King – is there any problem we have that could be beyond His jurisdiction? God is mighty – if Jesus can be the Son of God and the Son of Mary at the same time, are any of our problems too difficult for Him to solve? Is anything 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 a new life into a virgin's womb. He is a God Who brings powerful, selfless faith into a young girl's heart. 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 do all that as well, 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 this 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 surrendering our lives to Him as Mary did, will also bring us great blessings?