

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Luke 1:16-38

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, December 21, 2008
Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Mary’s Story”

(Me wearing a scarf on my head.)

Good morning! My name is Mary. You may remember me as the mother of Jesus Christ. I thought I would share with you some of my memories of what happened many years ago. I am sure you already know much of the story. I would like to give some of the background about the events as well.

All those years ago, I thought it interesting that through God’s power and surprising grace, He chose me, an unmarried very young woman, actually a young teen-ager, from a peasant village to be the mother of the Son of God. But I responded as I felt a believer should. I did not know my cousin Elizabeth had already been visited by the same angel with similar news.

The place in which I lived was called Nazareth. At that time, the population was about fifteen hundred people. It was considered a small village. It was located in the hill country of southern Galilee near the village of Jezreel which is between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, about 15 air miles from each. Girls were often betrothed when they were 12 to 14 years of age, sometimes to men several years older. I had recently been betrothed, or engaged or promised, to Joseph who was a carpenter by trade. I was still living with my parents as was customary, but the betrothal was legal and binding. If Joseph would have died, I would have been considered a widow.

My cousin Elizabeth was older. She and her husband Zechariah had been praying for a long time for a child before their prayers were answered. I had not been praying for a child since I was not yet married and was not to have a married relationship with Joseph until then. My pregnancy was totally God's doing. It was more than a little scary, especially in the beginning because I was only a child myself. The conception occurred by the power of the Most High, God, and the Holy Spirit overshadowed me. It was so miraculous, I was not even aware of when it happened.

What I remember is when the Angel named Gabriel appeared to me out of thin air and told me God had chosen me to have a holy baby without human contact. The angel told me to not be afraid for I had found favor with God. From all my religious instruction from my parents, I knew I was a disciple of God and a servant of the Lord and should respond in faith. But I did ask questions, not out of disbelief but seeking further information. If all these things were to happen, I knew I would have difficulty explaining to family, friends, and people in the village how I came to be with child without causing problems for myself, my family, and for Joseph. Most women in this position would be cast out, divorced, and possibly stoned to death.

In my conversation with the Angel Gabriel, he told me first I was highly favored with God. I was troubled. Because I am normally humble, quiet, and shy, I wondered, "Why me? I am too unimportant for God to notice me." At the same time, something inside me seemed to understand a little of the mystery of life and the mystery of God. I seemed to realize those highly favored by God do not have a life of unbroken happiness. After Gabriel convinced me to trust him and trust God, I listened to what Gabriel

explained about God's plans for me and the baby. Then Gabriel told me my cousin Elizabeth was already six months into her pregnancy at her advanced childless age. I replied, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." When I heard of Elizabeth, I knew I could trust in God, and do His will. I then traveled to visit Elizabeth.

While I stayed with Elizabeth, we talked much. She related her story to me. We were both nervous but excited to be chosen by God for these holy purposes. When Elizabeth's baby leapt inside her at my arrival, I could not contain myself and broke into a song of praise recorded in Luke 1:46-55:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Elizabeth and I were both joyful!

I stayed with Elizabeth about three months. By the time I returned home, it was obvious to everyone what was happening inside me. I was not warmly

welcomed. My family demanded an explanation, as did Joseph. I tried to explain about my conversation with the Angel Gabriel, but no one believed me. I found through experience those who are chosen, those highly favored by God, are to be prepared for pain and suffering. That happened many times in my life.

Eventually, Gabriel appeared to a skeptical Joseph one night in a dream and confirmed all I had tried to explain. Joseph had been planning to divorce me quietly, but he changed his mind after Gabriel spoke with him. My family was still not totally supportive. I suppose that is to be expected.

Afterwards, I realized I did have a choice. I could have said to Gabriel, “No thanks. I do not need this. I want to continue with things the way they are.” But I know I made the better choice because I was brought up to be obedient to God. I knew God never forces His love or His will on anyone. Gabriel had announced God’s plan and purpose to me. He explained it would not be carried out without my consent. I was a very young girl, barely a teenager when I chose to serve God. It was not something glamorous. I suffered the ridicule and contempt of being pregnant and unmarried in a small village full of gossips. Knowing all this, I still agreed to serve God saying, “Let it be to me according to your word.” I understand now this is one of the most courageous statements ever recorded. Do I have regrets? No, not at all. Joseph and I raised God’s Son as our own, in the Jewish faith. There were many times I did not understand all that was said or all that happened. But I was not only His mother, I was perhaps one of His first and most loyal disciples and was by His side as often as possible. // I will now step aside for a few words from your pastor. Thank you for listening.

(As myself without scarf)

Luke is the Gospel writer who records in detail the angel's message to Mary, that she, a virgin, is to mysteriously conceive God's Son by the Holy Spirit with no other human involvement. This conception, often called the Incarnation which means being made human, is a key belief for Christianity. It seems logical to assume Luke may have visited and spoken with Mary about these events. Mary outlives her Son, Jesus, for an undetermined number of years. There is evidence she lives with the beloved disciple John in his exile on Patmos.

The Old Testament prophecy is that Jesus would be of David's lineage. While Joseph is of the house of David, Luke is careful to record Mary is the kinswoman of Elizabeth, who is from the house of Aaron. Therefore, Mary is also from the house of David. Through both Joseph and Mary the prophecy is fulfilled.

Bruce Larson, a Biblical scholar, believes Mary is chosen to bear God's own Son because she is one of the faithful remnant in Israel who understands, with God nothing is impossible.

Mary's hymn of praise upon arriving at Elizabeth's home is the famous Magnificat. In her naturalness, unself-consciousness, and humility, Mary is now able to sing about how proud she is that God has chosen her. In her true humility, she praises God because she is especially blessed.

The words of the Magnificat are possibly the most revolutionary words ever spoken. Through the Messiah, the mighty will be brought low; the humble

and the lowly will be raised up. Jesus, the ultimate revolutionary, completely reverses all human values. What Mary prophesizes about her unborn Son is terrifying to the establishment, whoever and wherever they are. They cannot hear these words gladly. Deep down we all know Jesus comes to save us from our sins.

Mary's Magnificat is valuable for two reasons. First, it fills out the story of Gabriel's announcement to Mary. The emotional power of the moment is developed with great skill so the reader continues to be as stunned as Mary (well, almost!) over the shock of Gabriel's proclamation. Mary's response in the text is quiet, as if she is nearly speechless by the power of the angel's words.

At some point, though, Mary just has to say something! So after Elizabeth speaks with Mary about how blessed and special she is, Mary finds her own voice and the words gush forth in a torrent of wonder and praise.

Second, and more important, the value of this text lies in the manner in which it helps us to understand God's promise to David. In other words, the Magnificat portrays Messiahship in quiet, distinctive ways which are different from other views of the Messiah. How could Mary not express the deepest sense of awe over God's astounding grace?

The Magnificat emphasizes two qualities of God which result from the coming of the King. One is mercy, and the other is power. These are characteristics of both God and the divinely anointed king. This mercy and

power are remembered and are linked to God 's promises to Israel-of-old, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Within the announcing of Christ's coming by the Angel Gabriel, three themes become important. First, Gabriel states in Luke 1:37 in plain language: "For nothing will be impossible with God." Gabriel's final words to Mary sum up the birth stories of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Although the conception is highly unusual with John's parents being old and his mother unable to have children, their story nevertheless recalls similar stories from the Hebrew Bible so the reader knows what to anticipate. Like Sarah and Abraham, surely Zechariah and Elizabeth will find their hopes fulfilled. If their hopes are fulfilled, the probability of a young teenaged girl being the mother of our Lord through God and the Holy Spirit can also be anticipated. Gabriel assures Mary all things are possible with God.

A second theme in this story is too often neglected. The theme is of grace. Gabriel greets Mary with the words, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you," and assures her, "You have found favor with God." The Greek words here are translated as "favor," but they could equally be translated as "grace." Mary is the object of God's grace.

What is it about Mary which makes her appropriate as an object of God's grace? Surprisingly, there is nothing in the text to give even a hint to answer this question. No reason is given to explain God's choosing her.

In reality, this is the point exactly. God chooses because, God chooses. Mary does not earn the honor of becoming the mother of God's Son any

more than any other woman. This Biblical story is not describing how someone's virtue is rewarded. It is a story about the endlessly unmerited nature of God's grace.

The third theme of the passage deals with Mary's response to God's grace. After Gabriel's announcement, Mary first identifies herself as "the servant of the Lord." Mary's response recognizes she is selected by God, and God's choosing her leaves no room for her own will. Like others within Luke's stories, most notably the apostle Paul, Mary's service occurs as a result of God's plan, not her own.

In the second part of Mary's response, she consents to God's plan: "Let it be with me according to your word." Through the Magnificat, Luke places in Mary's mouth the words which powerfully interpret the birth of Jesus Christ as the triumph of God for God's people. Later, Mary will puzzle over events surrounding her child's birth and his behavior. But for now, Mary says yes to God's action for reasons she may never fully understand. All she knows is she is doing God's will.

How many of us today are willing to commit to doing God's will, no questions asked? Mary is taught from a young age to be obedient to God. So when God asks her at this early age to become the mother of His only Son, she says yes, without hesitation! If one of us would be confronted by an angel, or by God Himself, and be asked to do something which may place us in a precarious and possibly a dangerous position, I have to wonder whether we would immediately say yes as Mary did. Or would we say, "Let me think about it and see if what you are asking fits in with my schedule and

my plans. I will get back to you on this.” Do we first stop to consider what is in it for us or what will others think of us if we do it?

As we continue through Advent and prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus Christ into our hearts and minds in a few days, let us also prepare ourselves to decide how we can more effectively serve God. Let us look for new ways and more ways to use the gifts and opportunities God gives us on a regular basis to do His will. Let us not always wonder what others may think or whether we have time. God is asking us to put God first in our lives and serve Him, not to serve money and material goods.

Our Advent prayer is Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus. Let us put Christ first in our lives, and I can guarantee we will be more blessed than we can believe. When God asks, He wants us to say yes. Let us all say yes to God in the days to come. Amen!