

“Christmas Character: Mary”

Luke 1:26-35, 46-49

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How are we to understand Mary? This is the whole point of my message. I am talking about the virgin Mary, Jesus’ mother. We know that the virgin Mary was specially chosen by God and became the mother of Jesus. What a great honor that she was chosen by God in His great plan! Some of you may think of Mary as a model of obedience who accepted her destiny and submitted her will to the almighty God. Or some of you may find her to be a strong and confident woman who committed her call and would fulfill God’s will. We want to know more about Mary. Among the four gospels, only the gospel of Luke highly lifts up Mary in Jesus’ birth story. There must be a special purpose why Luke’s account speaks to Mary’s character. What spiritual lessons can we find for our spiritual growth from the story of the virgin Mary? I invite us all to learn more about Mary this morning.

Let’s begin with Mary’s story. It may sound strange to you, but in Mary’s times, the average life expectancy was less than thirty-five-years and young women married when they were teenagers. We can easily guess that Mary was a teenager. She was born and grew up in the small town of Nazareth. She was engaged to be married. But we know that an angel came to her and told her that she will be pregnant and would be the mother of the Son of God. Her life will be dramatically changed whether she likes it or not. Mary must have been confused, deeply concerned about her future life, because according to the law, young women who were engaged but found to be pregnant by someone other than their fiancé were to be stoned to death. Do we understand her fear and anxiety? Mary was not experiencing a joyful and exciting life changing event, but this encounter and her decision could ruin her life, dignity and relationships with her family. She had to be careful and responsible for her acts and choices.

Imagine how you would respond to the angel Gabriel’s invitation if you were Mary. Absolutely, you have a right to say, “Hey, Gabriel, I appreciate your message. It sounds like a great plan, but I want to pass this time. I am sorry!” We need to know that Mary was not compelled to accept the angel’s message. We always have a choice to make our decision. A French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre reminded us of the importance of choice. Once he said, “Life is between B and D and is C.” He means our life is between Birth and Death and is Choice. He was an atheist existentialist, but it is true that life is full of choices and

opportunities. We always face situations that need decisions. This is an important lesson in our lives and it will work for our spiritual life as well. We have a right to make a choice. God always wants us to make the right choice and stay on God's side.

There are three points in Mary's attitude and choice. First, her spiritual discernment of God's work: Look at Mary's song of praise. She praises, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary's confession makes me think of a "magnifying glass." A magnifying glass is a convex lens that produces a magnified image of an object. When we encounter unexpected challenges and difficulties, we easily feel perplexed and panicked like Mary. It is hard for us to discern God's purposes. Even though Mary couldn't fully understand God's plan, she decided to offer herself wholly to God. Like a magnifying glass, her soul was able to see a bigger picture that God would work through her life. We need Mary's spiritual 'magnifying lens' so that we can see God and God's profound way for our life in the midst of our challenges. As the Apostle Paul advises the Philippians Church that "The peace of God, which surpasses our understanding, will guard your hearts and your mind in Jesus Christ" God's way is always exceeding beyond our expectations.

Secondly, Mary was humble and had positive spirit even in her challenges. When the angel told Mary about God's plan, Mary reflects and questions back to the angel saying, "Who are you? And how can this be?" Then the angel explains, "It is your spirit that God seeks as Godbearer and it is God's spirit that will enter you." It is not hard to imagine how bitter this reality is to a teenage girl who was deciding what to do. In the worst case, her pregnancy with someone else's baby may ruin her wedding dreams. But she humbly said, "Yes Lord". In her song of praise, she says "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Can we be calm and praise God when we are struggling with a harsh reality in front of us? I imagine that especially for Mary, the trip to Bethlehem would have been the most difficult and uncomfortable journey, but she would trust in God. Simply, she respected God's purposes and rejoiced trusting in God. This is how Mary handled her life challenges!

Lastly, Mary was bold and courageous to trust the promise of God. Socio-economically, probably, Mary was on the lowest rung of Jewish society. She was not a citizen of Rome, not of any importance in and among her own people. In her song of praise, she says "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Mary must have been a thirteen or fourteen year old and a peasant girl living in the tiny village of Nazareth. Speaking of Nazareth, the city was so

insignificant that it didn't even show up on first-century maps nor in the Old Testament. But Mary boldly responded to the angel saying, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." She continues, "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." Her bold faith startled her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

Let's go back to our first question: "How are we to understand Mary?" Mary was humble, had a positive spirit and bold courage to move towards the promise of God even in a despairing situation. She didn't decide to walk away from her reality, but she trusted in God's guidance. God wants us to have this faith! A mystic, Meister Eckart who lived between 1260 and 1327 says, "We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born." The virgin Mary's story challenges us to be like Mary. God always wants our active cooperation. God always wants to be with us, present among us and invites us to work with Him. But if we are not ready to see, hear and accept God's invitation, God can't work within us. The word, "Advent" literally means 'arriving'. Advent involves our longing of God's coming to us in our anticipation. In this holy season of Advent, God is eager to come to us, dwell and work within us. We are all invited and called to be Mary. I hope and pray that we open our hearts and receive this personal invitation from the angel Gabriel as a great honor of God's favor. Amen.