



Dec 24: Be Courageous | Luke 1:26-38

What are we to do with Mary? A virgin addressed by an angel, but challenged by God, to have a baby?

A teenager invited to face the unknown in faith, to trust in God's grace and provision. Ultimately, Mary's courageous example of faith.

It's beautiful.

I resonate with her story a bit. Having at times faced the unknown and the challenges that life brings. Not necessarily in faith. No. Not necessarily trusting in God or God's provision. Much more like just surviving.

Watching my mother fight cancer for ten years until her body just wore out.

Job losses and the loss of security that brings.

Watching my brother's addiction steal his life away year after year.

Life throws challenges and heartbreak and disruption at us.

We get unceremoniously dumped into deep choppy waters against our will. In currents too fast, too strong.

You know this. We've all had to face challenges. Whether those are difficulties about our health, stress in the family, a divorce, end of life concerns, watching a loved one pass, battling emptiness and lack of purpose, or financial strain.

We've all had to face many uncertainties in our lives. You may even find yourself there now.

We are constantly being presented with situations where we must move forward in spite or alongside of our uncertainties.

So, Mary. Yeah...the Church, ever since its conception, has struggled to know what to do with Mary.

Catholics have venerated her. Maybe to excess with medieval theologians discussing a Quaternity rather than a Trinity.

Protestants have then reacted in equally unhealthy ways, by mostly ignoring her.

Or extending value to Mary only on the basis that she was a woman, had a womb, and gave birth to Jesus. Her worth is solely based on who she birthed.

The original disciples...don't mention much about Mary in their gospels. Mark mentions her when her and her family are trying to collect Jesus one evening because they think he is insane.

Matthew only mentions her at the empty tomb. John never mentions her by name. And Paul makes no mention of her at all.

Until Luke comes along.

Except Luke doesn't exult her has a goddess, or as a mother, or even as a woman. What?!

He believes Mary had an even more important role. To be seen as an ideal Christian, as a model of faith for every person. For us to emulate her, especially if we want to follow her Son.

I don't buy into her value coming through childbirth. If that was all there was to Mary's story, we wouldn't need Mary's story. Just have the baby, already! One sentence..."And she gave birth to a son and they named him Jesus." Done.

No, there is a reason we have this beautiful story of Mary's encounter with God. There is a reason Mary is remembered and cherished this time of year.

There is a reason Luke carefully drew this story out of Mary and recorded it for us, for now and for all time.

Because Mary's story is our story too.

Here Mary is challenged to trust God will help her along the way. And she said yes. **"I am the Lord's servant..."**

But her response itches my brain. What kind of relationship did Mary have with God before Gabriel came?

How had she prepared herself to be able to respond to God with a yes? Or how had God prepared her to say yes to disruption and difficulty and pain for God's sake?

First, let's notice together three bigger movements within her story. Very helpful for our journey of walking with God.

Especially if we aren't all that sure we have much faith to begin with. Or if, also like me, we know we probably couldn't say yes immediately to God.

Mary didn't immediately say yes, but she did way way quicker than I could have mustered.

We begin in verse 29, with fear and confusion. Then in verse 34 Mary moves to being inquisitive. Until their conversation opens up, and she is courageous in verses 35 to 38. Steps to a holy dance between a human and God.

To this end goal. This amazing watercolor of Mary, by Ronald Raab, depicts her complete yielding to God. A soul open to God.

To achieve that full and fierce surrender of self, exemplified by Mary, our aim in our relationship with God.

Let's go in for a closer look. First, the greeting in verse 28 the angel Gabriel begins. **"Greetings, you who are highly favored! This Lord is with you."**

And Mary's response...one of a saint or rock star in the faith? No, a response of a normal human being. Thankfully!

This picture seems to show startlement. Verse 29 tells us what she told Luke many years later. She was greatly troubled at the angel's words.

Greatly troubled?! No kidding!

An angel?

That's not normal.

But I do love how normal Mary's response is, honest distress and authentic inner turmoil.

Gabriel notices her struggle and offers comfort, **"Do not be afraid, Mary..."**

We don't know how much time has passed here. But the next thing Mary says proves she has moved beyond her bewilderment.

Mary becomes curious. She asks, **"How will this be?"** I might have said something like, "Hypothetically speaking...IF I were to say yes...how will this be? But Mary gets to the point.

The angel then goes on to explain...sort of. He says that the Holy Spirit will come and the **"the power of the Most High will overshadow you."** Which, in my mind, just generates more questions. Clear as mud.

By now, Mary has found some way to collect herself, doesn't need more clarification or to understand. Such poise, such bravery, she accepts with, **"May your word to me be fulfilled."**

Fear, curiosity, and then courage. I've never noticed those three steps. Have you?

And these three steps are helpful for everyone. Helpful to keep in mind the next time we experience God drawing near, stirring us to live, to serve, to give, to trust.

Steps that give us permission to be who we are. There was space for Mary to be anxious and to question even. We can be emotionally honest with God.

I don't know about you, but in the past, I have also found it pretty easy to keep Mary's encounter with God at arm's length.

First, Gabriel an angel. Haven't experienced that. And there can only be one mom of Jesus. And then she got married, had more kids. More things I haven't experienced.

So, a bit easier for me to dismiss her story. And I can't even imagine how this is landing on the guys today.

But this time, her story holds more resonance. There are more points of connection than ever before, for us all.

First, this dance of intimacy from fear, to curiosity, to courage.

Then the reminder to trust God in life's challenges. For us to face our futures with courage, with trust, trusting God -motivated by grace - will lead and provide.

Two points of connection.

But here is another point of connection, another place where Mary's story is truly our story too.

Again at the beginning, "**Greetings, you who are highly favored!**" And also in the next verse, "**Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.**"

The same Greek verb which means "favored" is used just one other place in the New Testament, in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 6, ". . . **his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.**"

So favor can be translated to grace. Therefore, the same favor or grace that God gave Mary, is for us too. And we have the same amount of grace given to us. Freely given to us thru Christ, the One he loves.

All throughout scripture, God extends grace to every person he interacts with...Noah, Abraham, Moses, Zechariah, Elizabeth, John the Baptist.

God chooses to act on their behalf, extending help, giving aid, blessing, the grace of relationship and grace in being given a part to play in God's story. Amazing grace!

God's action is not based on Mary's merit. Grace is help that God gives freely, unmerited, and unearned.

As in by grace we too have been saved.

By grace we too are invited into and given a part to play in God's unfolding redemptive work in the world.

By grace we too who were far off have been brought near, into God's loving arms and Forever Family.

And by grace this story of Mary carrying Jesus into the world, is our story too. We too are being called to carry Jesus into the world.

And perhaps our own fears and questions surface. Echoing Mary we ask, **How can this be? How can we bear the Son of God into the world?**

For Mary, she asked, "**How will this be since I am a virgin?**" No small technicality.

We might also question, "**How can this happen?** Since I am...young, old, single, married, widowed, poor, not interested, or fearful...very fearful. Or fill in the blank.

This is where I love the King James Version. Gabriel's response is something we need to hear again and again, "**For with God nothing is impossible.**" God will help us.

BUMC, hear and remember that God favors you (now, through the holidays, and always). We are full of grace. God invites you into His greater story and will give you what you need, now and in the future.

What would your life look like if you were willing to lean into grace, believe in God's promises to help you? What kind of courage would that give you?

Being graced, we are called to use what God gives us to benefit others. Yes, we are blessed, but we are blessed to be a blessing.

What would it look like for our church to, by God's grace, collect our courage and face with mature faith the uncertainties that we will inevitably encounter in 2024?

Trusting God will provide for us all that we need. Just like Mary did. Just like Mary did.

Time for Reflection: In our time of reflection...

What would your life look like if you gave the idea that you are graced by God...a big ole bear hug? Robustly trusting God is for you 100%, with you every step of the way, providing for you...what kind of courage would that give you?