

Where do you come into the picture?

## Mary: Expecting the promise to come

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne

Advent 2

December 7, 2008

### From Luke 2 (NLT)

God sent the angel Gabriel to ... a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin." The angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God ... For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And then the angel left ...

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

**Once you take Mary off that kind of pedestal, and off your dashboard, you can put her back into the Christmas story where she belongs. And there, in the manger, you get a picture of a completely compelling example of faith in God from which you and I can learn.**

**Message:** We heard reports this week that the shopping figures for Black Friday were not as bad as forecast, meaning that the Christmas season may not be as bleak for retailers as economists had predicted. Of course, there are other signs that with all that's happening in the world, people are finding it harder to get into the Christmas Spirit this year. My family, for instance, has delayed putting up decorations and a tree for later in the month. We normally are decked out after Thanksgiving. I've noticed a similar "spiritual funk" in others. How about you? Have you started to get into the spirit of the holidays? Have you played any holiday music yet? Sent any cards? Put a funny Christmas message on your voice mail box? Maybe what we all need is to get back to the basics of the Christmas story, you know, cut back on the extras and look for what really makes Christmas the most wonderful time of the year.

Here's one example from the news. A leaked corporate memo from Christmas HQ shows others are trying this same tactic:

*Due to the current financial situation in the stock market, and with the big three asking Congress for bailouts, the Board of Directors of the North Pole are considering some new cost cutting steps. Effective immediately, the following changes will take place in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" music subsidiary.*

*The partridge will be retained, but the pear tree, which never produced the cash crop forecasted, will be replaced by a plastic hanging plant, providing considerable annual savings in maintenance.*

*Two turtle doves represent a redundancy that is simply not cost effective. In addition, their romance during working hours could not be condoned. The positions are, therefore, eliminated.*

*The four calling birds will be replaced by an automated voice mail system.*

*The five golden rings are being sold off in part by the Board of Directors. Maintaining a portfolio based on only one commodity was seen as having negative implications and the Board has chosen to diversify its holdings.*

*Furthermore, the eight maids-a-milking concept has been under heavy scrutiny by the EEOC. A male/female balance in the workforce is being sought. Some of the more militant maids consider this a dead-end job with no upward mobility. Automation of the process may permit the maids to try new ventures such as a-mending, a-mentoring, a-mulching.*

*Eleven pipers piping and twelve drummers drumming is a simple case of the band getting too big. Substituting a quartet will keep costs in line.*

Well I suppose keeping the band in line is always a good thing, but no matter how you cut things back, there are some essential personnel who must stay in place for the Christmas season. Here at Church of the Spirit we're looking at the essential people from the first Christmas story. You know, there is something to be learned from how the Wise Men and

the shepherds, the angels and Joseph and Mary all reacted to the presence of Jesus in their midst.

Last week we looked at Joseph's faith. Now Joseph started as we all do, by asking for God's help to make it through the challenges he faced. Only, his faith had to grow deeper because his challenges grew greater. The news that his fiancée was pregnant, and he was not the father, meant Joseph had to make a number of choices. That's when he chose to believe in the impossible, hard as it might be. Instead of asking for God to just help him accept his fate, Joseph asked for miracles to happen in the world around him. His faith was more than a sense of trust God could help him spiritually, in his heart and mind. He started to believe God could, and would act in the world around him, to do the unexpected, the impossible. I asked you how often you believe God can do the impossible. Then I challenged you to ask for God's help in changing things beyond your control, and to act in anticipation of God acting for you. That would be the way to step out in faith, in the faith Joseph had.

I realize that is a big step to take. It takes a lot of faith to believe God can and will enter into this world and change things. You have to believe that God is bigger than science, for instance, because every miracle is a moment in which the natural way of things is bent or broken. Sure, I understand many people have problems believing in miracles these days. Many people had problems believing in miracles centuries ago too. Please don't fall into the trap of thinking we are all so much more sophisticated and modern than people were back in Jesus's day ... while that's true, the people back then were not so stupid (or so naive) they didn't recognize miracles as strange things that should not be happening. They didn't accept everything blindly on faith back then either. Even so, today people have more faith in the theories of science than in the thoughts of religion. And of course, science does not allow for miracles. Oh, and reason can not accept miracles because they are so, well, unreasonable. Go figure. Personally, I'm not all that concerned with miracles. When it comes to science and the natural laws of this world, I simply remember where they came from. God. Please remember what I said last week: I have no problem accepting this story of Christmas as historically true, though I am also willing to say it is a very strange story and hard to believe. That, after all, is the whole point. At Christmas God enters into time and space to do things that we could not do for ourselves, things we could not even imagine for ourselves ... which means the whole Christmas thing should make you wonder. Or perhaps you could just say it is wonderful.

OK, Joseph believed what was impossible. That's a hard thing to do. (Come to think of it, he could have been a Redskins fan.) But there's another reason so many people may find it hard to have faith like Joseph. Along with believing in the impossible, his kind of faith requires a willingness to risk being disappointed. Maybe what you believed in will not happen, or it will not happen in the way you expected it, or when you expected it. How many times have you trusted in God, and prayed, and prayed some more, for something you thought was a good thing, only to feel disappointed? You felt God did not come through for you. When that happens you can give up on God, or you can look again at your faith.

Today we're looking again at faith, only this time we're looking at the faith of a young girl named Mary. What is there about her faith that will help you and me in the week ahead? Let's find out.

First let's make sure we're looking at the right Mary. There's been a lot of things said about her over the centuries, a lot of additional stories that have been built up about Mary which can not be found in the Bible. That's not to say these are bad, just that they are not my concern. I'm really interested most of all in what the Bible teaches me. That's actually a very good starting point for everyone. I mean, here's a way you can find some common ground where even Baptists and Roman Catholics can agree ... when you take the Bible seriously as written, you can not simply write off the story of Mary as unimportant, or unscientific, and leave it at that. Mary's story plays an important role in it all.

I can't say I always felt that way. For instance, I grew up in a small protestant church in New England, where the Roman Catholic Church was predominant. So, I first saw Mary as a fixture on a lot of dashboards. Let me explain that in case you didn't grow up in the same culture. Long before we had GPS boxes on every dashboard, people had spiritual GPS systems installed in their cars. They came in the form of a small plastic statue of Mary. I suppose Mary was there to guide them or protect the driver. I also saw Mary in another way, in what we once called the "Mary in the Bathtub". OK that wasn't respectful, but it was what I thought of whenever I saw the many, many statues of Mary in small shrines that the folk in the nearby town placed in their backyards. I didn't know any better at the time. I thought only my church's expression of faith was the right one so these looked kind of funny to me.

Of course, once you take Mary off that kind of pedestal, and off your dashboard, you can put her back into the Christmas story where she belongs. And there, in the manger, you get a picture of Mary that is a completely compelling example of faith in God from which you and I can learn. Here is an example of a person who had faith and doubt, both, she even had faith even in the midst of her challenges. Hers was a faith that relied on God even more than on his promises. Imagine that, she believed more in who God was than in what God could do for her. Now that's a level of faith I need to have. How about you?

Ever ask yourself whether you believe in God for what he can do for you, or for who he is? Ever feel like you would lose your faith if you lost out on the answers to your prayers? Would you be willing to follow a God who did not magically keep you safe from every sickness, every unexpected bill or heartbreak? Would you still trust such a God who nonetheless never left your side, no matter what happened in your life?

Mary's faith shines brightly from the very first story we have of her in the Bible. There she encounters an angel who tells her she will be the mother of the savior. Mary is spunky, or maybe just surprised, or inquisitive. She could have been precocious. It doesn't really change the story why she spoke up ... but that she did is key. She doesn't naively accept what the angel says. She asks questions, "*But how can this be?*" She has her doubts. She's not just some ancient person who of course was

naive and gullible and would believe anything. Mary was smart enough to know she wasn't going to get pregnant all by herself. "How can this be?" Mary asks the question every skeptic has asked for centuries. "How can this be?" The angel explains that the baby will be born of the Holy Spirit as God overshadows her. OK, well there you have it. It's not much of an explanation, certainly not a very detailed explanation, it's neither scientifically repeatable or reliably quantifiable. Then the angel adds the clincher: "For nothing is impossible with God. Nothing is impossible ..."

What do you think of when you hear these words? What's the angel talking about here? If we took a survey I'd bet that almost

**"Lord I am willing to accept whatever you want." How easy is it for you to say those words this morning, you know to say them and really mean them?**

everyone of you would say the angel is talking about how becoming pregnant in this way is not impossible for God. After all, that's the big problem in the story for modern-minded folk like you and me. That's the impossible part we have such a hard time with. But that's not

what's going on here, at least not the big story line here. Mary, I am sure, heard the angels words differently. "For nothing is impossible with God."

Those words are directed at the real misgivings Mary has throughout the whole story (go back and read it again later and you'll see). Mary is amazed, she's stunned that God would choose her, a young uneducated girl in an out of the way place to be the mother of the Messiah for whom the whole nation had been waiting for centuries. Like that made sense. She must have been thinking, "Who am I? Why has God chosen me for this task?" Do you understand her concern, her self-doubt? The angel greeted her with: "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Then we're told that: "Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean." Do you understand she's not worried about the gynecological issues involved so much as her role in all of this. Becoming pregnant before she was married would be a heavy burden in her culture. Could she carry it off? This was certainly not what she expected to have happen in her life. "Why me?" she asks. Well, wouldn't you?

Maybe I should ask that in a more familiar way ... Haven't you asked God from time to time, "Why me?" Maybe you're more tempted to ask such a question when bad things happen to you. "Why me?" comes out so easily, as if you were asking, "Hey God, why not Steve over there, or Henry for a change, huh, why is it always me?" Only there's another time you may ask this same question, and mean something far more important. You may very well ask "Why me?" in that moment you realize that God loves you no matter where you have been or what you have done. I've had times when I could only see my own failings, when I could not imagine how God would forgive me or accept me just as I was at that moment. And yet it's at precisely those moments that you can hear God's voice once again reassure you and welcome you back, like a lost son who has returned

from a far off land. It is at those times when you feel like there is no logical reason for God to take you back again that you will find yourself asking, "Why me, Lord? Why do you love me? Why do you keep forgiving me? Why?" But then, the only answer you get to those kinds of questions is not so much an answer as a sense of God's presence. When you understand God is with you, you can experience a reassurance that his love is stronger than your sins, and his presence more powerful than any of your doubts. And with God present, you may find your need for scientific explanations goes away.

That's how Mary showed her faith. She spoke of her trust in God's overshadowing presence with these famous words, "I am the Lord's servant. I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." The older translation of this said, "Let it be to me according to thy will." In other words, Mary said the words Jesus would later teach us all to say, "Thy will be done." Those are the words Jesus would pray right before being arrested and tortured and killed. "Thy will be done, not mine Lord." And those are words Christians have said over and over for centuries, each time we have prayed, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Yes, each time we say that prayer we are saying to God, "I am willing to accept whatever you want, Lord."

Only ... I wonder. How easy is it for you to say those words this morning, you know to say them and really mean them? "Lord I am willing to accept whatever you want." Can you truthfully say something like that? I can, well, sometimes. And sometimes I'd like to have more control over the consequences of my faith. I'd like God to follow my plans, live up to my expectations. That's what I mean in saying that Mary gives us a completely compelling example of real faith. Overwhelmed by being chosen as someone God favors, Mary responds first with doubts and concerns, then with a faith in God to do what is best, whatever is best, whatever else may happen. Because no matter what else happens she feels secure knowing God will be with her. Her faith is all about trusting that God's got it all under control. With the assurance that God is near, she can trust him whatever else may happen, wherever God leads, and whatever it costs. If only I could say the same, and say to God, "Whatever."

### Solo: Whatever

Recorded by Steven Curtis Chapman

I made a list, wrote down from A to Z  
All the ways I thought that you could best use me  
Told all my strengths and my abilities  
I formed a plan it seemed to make good sense  
I laid it out for you so sure you'd be convinced  
I made my case, presented my defense  
But then I read the letter that you sent me  
It said that all you really want from me is just  
Whatever, whatever you say, whatever, I will obey  
Whatever, Lord, have your way,  
'cause you are my God, whatever  
So strike a match, set fire to the list  
Of all my good intentions, all my preconceived ideas  
I want to do your will no matter what it is

*Give me faith to follow where you lead me  
Oh, Lord, give me the courage and the strength to do ...  
I am not my own, I am yours and yours alone  
You have bought me with your blood  
Lord, to you and you alone do I belong  
And so whatever ...*

Mary's faith teaches me to trust in God and to trust in his plans for me more than my plans for my life and everything in the world around me.

Mary's faith teaches me to love God for who he is not for what he has promised.

It means not placing expectations on God before I will follow him or trust in him. No expectations, except that God will keep his promise, and be with me always, even to the end of the ages, no expectations except his promise that he will watch over me and keep me from harm, or that God will someday, not today or tomorrow, but someday, wipe away every tear from my eyes. I will not expect God to do what I tell him to do this week, even when I try to dress up my expectations in words that sound like a prayer. I will not expect God to perform miracles on my

command, but instead look for the miracles he is already working in the world around me. And then, when my prayers seem to go unanswered, or I become disappointed with God, then I will look again at whether or not I was expecting the wrong things. I will ask myself, am I prepared to love God only if he came through for me the way I had hoped or to love him whatever happens? So what if I don't get everything on my wish list, so long as I get to be in God's presence more and more.

That's why I'm trying to be more like Mary who was willing to say yes to the unknown consequences of following God. She did that because it wasn't his plan she trusted, it was God himself, and she could trust him because she was ready for him to overshadow her, to be with her. I'm ready for that too. When you get back to the essentials of Christmas, that's it, to be ready for God to be with you. Now, and always. Whatever else happens.

*Come abide within me,  
Let my soul like Mary be thine earthly sanctuary  
Come indwelling Spirit,  
With transfiguring splendor, love and honor will I render  
Where I go, here below, let me bow before thee, know thee  
and adore thee*