

What Can We Learn From Mary? 2020
Isaiah 61:1-2, 8-10 Luke 1:38-55

Isaiah 61:1-2, 8-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Luke 1:38-55 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "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 away empty. 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."

Scott Peck's In 1978 best seller, "The Road Less Traveled"

begins with these words: "Life is difficult. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once we truly understand and accept it, then life is no longer difficult."

I have read and reread Peck's book several times,
and I've never found much comfort or hope in that idea.

Somehow, accepting that life is difficult in this broken world,
doesn't provide all that much encouragement or strength to endure
when I'm hurting, disappointed, defeated, anxious or struggling,
and not much help in getting past my fear and disasters.

Yes, don't we all know very well that life can be difficult?,
that there are disastrous situations beyond our control,

and that our world can be terribly cruel and destructive...
... with Covid-19 haven't we all had a share of that truth and reality?

The challenge is, how do we live faithfully beyond our struggles?,
and are we experiencing the hope, peace, joy and love
that should characterize our journey through Advent?

As I grappled with the concerns that keep me up & sleepless at night,
as I reflected on the Scripture passages that we just read,
I pondered how they might relate to our circumstances today,
and realized there are several things we can learn from Mary...

...because sometimes I do let problems, concerns & worries overwhelm me
and let discouragement and anxiety set me into a downward spiral...

... and that's not how God would have me live.

Earlier in the 1st chapter of Luke, preparing for the birth of Christ,
the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah, a priest working in the Temple.

He was an older, well-seasoned & respected religious leader, vs. 12-15a

When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him,
"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,
and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will
be great in the sight of the Lord.

But then Zechariah doubted and didn't really believe,

"No, that's not reasonable and I don't see how God can do that." vs. 18-20

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is
getting on in years."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to
you and to bring you this good news.

But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will
become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Then, just a few verses later, that same angel came to Mary.
Now Mary was a young peasant girl, barely a teenager,
seemingly of no great importance or influence, vs. 30, 35

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. The
angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow
you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

In clear contrast to Zechariah, Mary believes and responds, vs. 38

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

In Mary's case,

though she's young girl and maybe 13-15, she's going to have a baby,
which will most definitely change the plans she's made,
and make things a lot more difficult and complicated.

Unlike the peaceful, pastoral scenes depicted on Christmas cards,

Mary was so very young and had to be confused and frightened,
with her whole life, her dreams and plans before her,
and engaged to marry Joseph to make their life together-

**but God had another plan and purpose for her --- to which
she chose to submit, to accept God's will over her own. vs. 38**

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This is simple and absolute surrender to the will and purpose of God.

Mary obediently responds to God's call and his agenda for her--

- risking the loss of reputation in her home community,
- the rejection and shame of an unmarried pregnancy.

She trusted, and willingly accepted discomfort and inconvenience,
with considerable courage, for sake of fulfilling God's will,
"If that is what God wants of me, than let it come to pass."

From this world's perspective, Mary was a nobody, just a young girl,
someone seemingly insignificant, someone we wouldn't even notice,
and yet through Mary, God acted -- to redeem all of Creation.

**Imagine, God's plan to save the world, to heal our human brokenness,
in part, resting upon Mary's willingness to trust and obey.**

**But it's also important to recognize that Mary was an ordinary human,
chosen by God, through whom God uniquely accomplished his plan...**

...in that she freely and willingly submits her all,
body, mind and spirit to the will and purpose of God,
and so she serves God's will and purpose and plan.

Mary was given a difficult, life-altering and costly calling,
which she willingly, even eagerly accepts **and embraces.**

And after submitting, she celebrates and praises the Lord her God
for allowing her to participate in God's ongoing purpose and plan,
in the Lord's continuing agenda of mercy & justice, vs. 53, 46-48

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 away empty.

... And Mary said, "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."

The words Mary speaks in that passage are called the Magnificat.

They are a description of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ,
which fulfilled God's promise given through Isaiah 61, vs. 1

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring
good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and
release to the prisoners.

Now it isn't that Mary was unaware of the difficulties she faces,
but in true humility, **she is amazed** that God has chosen her,

and feels overwhelmed to be a part of God's plan and purpose.

Mary seems to grasp that through her and her faithful obedience,
the glory, grace, love, justice and compassion of God
will be made more visible and revealed to the world...

... **and she feels blessed that through her
God will fulfill his promises and gracious saving purpose.**

In Mary and her response to God's call we see willing acceptance,
and **absolute surrender** to the will, purpose and plan of God.

Whatever is of God, whatever God calls her to do,
she places way above her own interests, plans and desires.
She is truly a most remarkable person of faith and discipleship.

Mary took God at his word,
accepted, trusted, embraced and obeyed God's word,
despite the uncertainty of her rearranged-future,
and despite the fear that young woman must have felt...
... and so she becomes the model and ideal of **Christian discipleship**.

Quite literally, in accepting God's call to become mother of Jesus,
in mystery and wonder God's Presence lived and grew within her,
as through Mary, **God's Word physically became flesh.**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the
Word became flesh and lived among us... (John 1:1, 14)

Much like the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle and the Temple,
Mary became **the physical dwelling place of the Lord,**
where over the nine months, **God's Spirit became human flesh,**
and was revealed to the world when Jesus was born.

In a literal sense, and in a physical way, **in the flesh,**
Mary represents the spiritual life of every Christian,
when by faith we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior,
and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and salvation.

And through **the indwelling of the Holy Spirit living within us,**
our faith grows and develops as we are healed, transformed & saved,
and called by God to reveal and reflect God's love,
to magnify that grace back out into God's Creation...
... **which is to reflect God's gracious mercy, love and compassion
as the light of truth shining into the darkness of this world.**

That **theology of the incarnation** and word of God becoming flesh
is a profound mystery that is beyond human explanation,
but Mary helps us keep it real and practical,
with clear application to our Christian lives.

When life's challenges and stress cause me to feel anxious & unsure,
Mary's courage and faith demonstrates the right path to follow...
... and here are some practical steps that I find helpful.

- 1st** What is it exactly that's bothering me? Making me anxious?
I try to name specifically what it is that's got me upset.
Sometimes it helps to clarify my thinking and feelings
by actually writing it out as a list, item by item.
- 2nd** Pause to pray and bring it before God, item by item on the list,
which is to consciously place it before God in trust & faith
and this is important, **relying upon God's promise & power...**
... as Mary said, **Here am I, let it be with me according to your word.**
- 3rd** Resist the temptation to take it up again. Don't dwell on it,
avoid re-exposure, recognizing that it's toxic & destructive,
or as it's described in Proverbs 26:11 (also 2 Peter 3:22)
Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly.
... or the sow washed only to wallow in the mud.

We don't get to decide what we'll encounter and have to face in life,
but we can decide whether or not we will park and stay there.
It's a choice we make to trust and believe God,
as young Mary did, or not like Zechariah.

The promise is, that through God's power and grace and presence,
even amid disappointment, suffering, failure or defeat
yet God will accomplish victory and make good in our lives.

Mary demonstrates what it means
to focus on God beyond the personal, worrisome and immediate,
to see beyond our struggles, difficulties and trials
by trusting that God is up to something for good.

Mary's place in the Christmas story exemplifies our call to believe,
to embrace God's agenda, ahead of and in place of our own desires,
and like Mary, to bring and to bear Christ into our world
by living **lives of hope that proclaim the Good News...**

**... as through our discipleship and our walk of faith with the Lord,
we can make a difference as a blessing in the world around us.**

**Our call is to follow the faithfully-obedient example of Mary
who offered her whole self, even her body and future plans,
her all in magnifying God's love and mercy,
by bringing Jesus Christ into the world...**

**... everything in response to the love, grace and promises of God,
for that is how our faith deepens, expands, ripens and grows.**

Did you know that a fish will only grow in proportion
to the size of the aquarium in which it swims.

So too our faith cannot and will not grow
beyond the confines of our willingness to submit to God's will...

... and our refusal to trust **will block and limit** our spiritual growth,
which unfortunately is the faith-story of too many Christians.

Our walk with God cannot & will not grow beyond our willing obedience
the limits set by our trust, faith and submission to the Lord,
by our willingness to respond to God's favor and purpose.

What Mary did physically in the flesh – by offering her own body,
through the indwelling and growing of God's presence within her,
is exactly what we as Christians are called to allow
God's Spirit and grace to accomplish in and through us...
... and the blessing comes when we are willing to embrace it.

With her physical body, Mary literally gave birth to Jesus,
giving birth to God's gracious mercy and love for this world,
exactly as we are called and equipped to do spiritually...

... for as Mary gave birth according to God's will and loving purpose,
so too each of us has also been specifically chosen and favored
to magnify, to bring & reveal Jesus Christ out into our world.

So what can we learn from Mary? We can follow her example, vs. 38, 46-47
Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.
My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

**May what Scripture has to say about Mary, also be said about us,
that we believed, trusted, embraced & obeyed the promises of God.**