

Here am I, Servant of the Lord      2024  
 Luke 1:5-7, 10-15, 18-20, 26-31, 34-38, 46-49

Luke 1:5-7, 10-15, 18-20, 26-31, 34-38, 46-49 (New Revised Standard Version)

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 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. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 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."

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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. 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.

One Christmas eve, when I was just a year or two out of college,  
 I was in the church office between Christmas Eve services,  
     and a college student who had grown up in that church  
     called because she desperately needed some help.  
 She and her boyfriend were traveling from Boston by bus,  
     and needed a ride getting to her mother's house for Christmas.

They wouldn't arrive at the terminal in downtown Washington DC  
 until well after midnight, and her mother couldn't drive  
     through a snowstorm that late at night to pick them up.

I agreed that since I was ushering at the 11 o'clock worship service,  
 afterward, I'd drive downtown to the bus station & bring them home.  
     As it turned out, she was 'with child' though not married,  
     and they were coming home for Christmas to face her family,  
     to figure out how they would deal with their situation.

The connection to the Christmas story in Luke was unmistakable,  
 and I realized years later, that I'd played the part of the donkey  
     by providing a ride to a young, unmarried pregnant girl  
     trying to get to a place of shelter on Christmas eve.

Ever since that long night,

whenever I read the Christmas story, the part about Mary,  
I remember seeing that young woman in my rearview mirror,  
and looking into her very tired, worried & anxious eyes.  
That night helps me connect with Mary on the first Christmas.

Unlike the peaceful, pastoral scenes depicted on Christmas cards,  
Mary was so very young and she had to be confused and frightened,  
engaged to marry Joseph to build their life together,  
with her whole life, her dreams and plans **now on hold,**  
**because God had other plans and a different purpose for Mary,**  
**and she chose to accept submitting to God's will over her own.**

According to the text, vs. 26~31

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ... The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

Then the angel explained what you have found favor with God really meant,  
and Mary's faithfulness, trust & courage always astounds me, vs. 38,

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

"Let it happen to me, just as God wills -- just as the Lord said,  
according to God's will, God's purpose and plan **not mine.**"

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

Mary obediently responded to God call and his agenda for her,  
- risking the loss of reputation in her home community,  
- the rejection and shame of an unmarried pregnancy,  
even putting her pending marriage to Joseph at risk.

She trusted, without complaint accepted inconvenience & discomfort  
with considerable courage, for the sake of fulfilling God's will,  
"If that's what God wants of me, then let it come to pass.

Earlier in the 1<sup>st</sup> 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. 11~14,

Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, ...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.

But Zechariah wasn't buying that and didn't really believe , 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."

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."

Think about Mary's extraordinary obedience and trusting faith.

When my plans don't work out or when my life gets tangled up,  
or when something that I have arranged blows up in my face,

**I wish I could respond as well and faithfully as Mary.**

With Mary, there's no backing out, no griping or complaining,  
just let it be to me according to the Lord's will and purpose.

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 human brokenness,  
in part, resting upon Mary's willingness to believe, trust & obey.

But it's also important to recognize that Mary was an ordinary human,  
chosen by God, through who the Lord uniquely accomplished his plan,  
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 and justice, vs. 46-48,

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."

By the word 'magnify', she means she has been filled & is overflowing  
with God's glory, presence and power – the Holy Spirit within her.

To magnify, is to make something more clear and visible  
by enlarging & making hidden details more recognizable.

Here, to magnify means that  
God's love, purpose and grace will shine through her.

No, 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 she feels overwhelmed to be a part of God's plan & 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 incredibly blessed that through her,  
God will fulfill his promises and gracious saving purpose...

... and that whatever the cost may be, that she is part of something  
far more wonderful and amazing than she can possibly imagine.

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

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

Whatever God is up to, whatever God is calling her to do,  
she places way above her one interests, plans and desires.

She is a most remarkable person of faith and obedient 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, John 1:1, 14,

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...

Much like the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle and the Temple,

Mary actually became the physical dwelling place of the Lord,  
where over 9 months, God's Spirit became human flesh,  
and was revealed to the world when Jesus Christ was born.

In a literal sense, and in a truly physical way, in the flesh,  
Mary represents the spiritual reality of every true Christian,  
when by faith we received 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 the Word of God becoming flesh  
is a profound mystery that is far beyond any 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, trust & faith demonstrates **practical discipleship**.

Though we face disappointments, obstacles and perilous challenges,  
by faith and trust we can rely on God's promises and power,  
that the Lord will bring us through and never abandon.

Mary demonstrates what it means  
to focus on God beyond our personal wants and immediate desires  
and to see beyond our struggles, difficulties and trials in life  
by trusting that God is up to something good & blessing,  
something wonderful, mysteriously hidden and amazing.

As a younger man, my friends and I loved to go white-water rafting,  
and the rougher more treacherous the river, the better we liked it.

We went for the thrill, for the excitement, for the risk & the danger  
for the great challenge and high adventure of an extreme sport.  
We didn't go for an easy float or a comfortable placid river cruise,  
and the last thing we wanted was calm – smooth paddling.

For Mary, having found favor with God turned out to be  
an invitation to participate in a most costly adventure,  
definitely not an effortless, easy and placid river ride.

For her, obedience to God was not an escape from trouble and trial,  
and it doesn't prevent all trouble and suffering for us either,  
which I relate to two major & specific lessons  
that I learned through white-water rafting.

1<sup>st</sup> We followed and obeyed our river guide, or we got very wet.  
Our guide already knew the river, what was around each bend,  
and how to get through even the trickiest places intact.  
Through the Holy Spirit, God guides us along the river of our life.

2<sup>nd</sup> A most fundamental rule of white-water rafting,  
is that you always have to lean into the rocks and obstacles

by shifting your weight toward the danger as you approach.

For if you fearfully try to lean back and away,  
 then when your raft crashes into the oncoming boulders,  
 the front will bounce upward, forcing the raft up the rock,  
 and then the raft will flip over and dump you into the river.  
 If that happens, it's not longer the sport of 'rafting the rapids'  
 but becomes another sport called, 'falling into the river',  
 which isn't nearly as much fun as riding **on the river** in a raft.

If on the other hand, you do lean into and toward the obstacle  
 the rubber raft will harmlessly bounce off the oncoming danger,  
 and the force of the rushing water will float the raft around it.

We do not get to decide what we'll encounter and have to face in life,  
 but we can decide and we do choose whether to trust & believe God,  
 just 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, loss or defeat,  
 yet God will accomplish victory and make good in our lives.

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 bear Christ into our world  
 by living lives of hope & love 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 planned future,  
 her all in magnifying God's love, hope and mercy,  
 by bringing Jesus Christ into our broken world...  
 ... which is how our faith deepens, expands, ripens and grows.

The amazing truth that I have noticed many times over the years,  
 is that when someone is called and when they do serve faithfully,  
 they're richly blessed as their faith is being enlarged deeper.

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, call & purpose.

What Mary did physically in the flesh -- 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 that comes when we are willing to embrace it.

So, what can we learn from Mary? - to 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.*

Or, as in the familiar words of the hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*,  
 O holy Child of Bethlehem Descend to us, we pray  
 Cast out our sin and enter in **Be born to us today!**