

Are you available today?

Message for Sunday, December 20, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 1:26-39

Children's Message: Luke 2:1-7, Jesus' birth. There is the story of a king who, a couple of times each year, would take off his royal robes and, dressed as a peasant, would go out amongst his people. His advisors worried about this, but the king said, "I cannot rule my people unless I know how they live." God came to us as a baby in a feeding trough.

I read of someone who could not believe in Christianity because he could not imagine a God who would humble himself, like that king. Then one day he came across an anthill. He tried to get close enough to study it, but every time he bent low, his shadow caused all the ants to scurry away. He recognized that the only way in which he could ever come to know that colony of ants would be if he could somehow become an ant himself.

Sermon: "Are you available today?"

1) Why did God choose Mary?

Many of the prophets in the Bible gave messages to Israel which told about the Messiah whom God would send to save his people. For centuries after that, every generation of children grew up learning those prophecies. Every family wondered if one of their children would be the Messiah. It would have been a tremendous thrill for them.

Around the time when Jesus was born, some scholars estimate the population of Israel was about five million Jews. Let's say half of those were women, about two and a half million. Let's say one fifth of these (just because it's easier to do the math) were young women of child-bearing age, about 500,000. Out of all those to choose from, why did God choose Mary?

In fact, why that time in history for the Messiah to come into the world? As the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar* notes,

Why'd you choose such a backward time in
such a strange land?
If you'd come today you could have reached a
whole nation:

Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication.

But I'm getting off topic. Just one question at a time.

Why Mary? Was she special? Was she the purest and holiest woman in Israel? In some circles, the answer to that would be "Yes." The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church believe that. So do some Protestant churches, both present and past. John Calvin, one of the Reformers, firmly held that belief. In the Roman Catholic Church in particular, they have built up an entire set of doctrines describing how unique and special Mary was.

Let's see what the Bible says.

Luke 1:26-28, New International Version:

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

It says that Mary was "highly favoured." That word translated "favoured" comes from the more common biblical word "grace." Grace is when one love someone even though they don't deserve it. "Favoured" describes the person who receives grace. In other words, Mary was a fine and decent person; but that isn't why God chose her. It was simply an act of grace, of God's blessing in her life.

2) Availability, not ability

What that means, then, is that God can do great and wonderful things with any of us here. It's not that you or I have amazing skill and experience which God finds invaluable. It's not about us at all. It's about God working with us. It's not our ability; it's our availability, our willingness, having a servant's heart.

Mary was young, poor and female. Put all three of those together and, in her culture, that meant that she was just about useless for any significant task. The key is that she was willing.

Consider her reaction to the angel's announcement that she will bear a child who will be the Messiah. Or rather, consider what she did *not* say. Her first thought might have been, "How could I explain to

Joseph?” Or, “How could I face the shame of being unmarried and pregnant?” Maybe, “What will happen to me?” Instead she simply asks, “How will God perform this miracle and make me, a virgin, mother of the Messiah?” When Gabriel explains the miracle, Mary’s immediate response is,

Luke 1:38, New International Version:

“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

Do you hear the echo of that statement? It bounces back thirty-odd years later in the Garden of Gethsemane, when that child, now a grown man, faces his great decision. Similar to his mother, he answers:

Luke 22:42, New International Version:

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

You have heard me say, “There is no higher calling in life, than to be a servant of Jesus Christ.” A servant is simply someone who says, “God, I am yours. Your agenda is more important than mine. Your ways are better than my ways. Your will is more desirable than my will.” We see this time and again through the Bible. That’s inspiring, but the key is when it becomes real in our lives.

Several years ago I went on a silent retreat. I went to a convent in Kingston so that I would be alone and away from all distractions. For that whole week, it was just God, the Bible, me and a notebook. A silent retreat is done in solitude; I’m not chattering away with other people who happen to be here. Although I had my meals in the dining room, even there I did not speak with anyone.

The sole exception to this is that every morning I met with my spiritual director, Sister Lorraine. I would tell her how my study and prayers went the day before, and she would suggest new passages for me to contemplate. She was trying to teach me a different way of reading the Bible: not for sermon preparation or for teaching a group, but just for my own spiritual life. The idea is to place myself in the Bible passage, imagining that God is speaking personally to me.

On Wednesday of that week, one of the passages she gave me was Luke 1:26-38, where Mary (or

Bruce, in this case) is told that she (he) is going to become pregnant and bear the Son of God. Here are some of the highlights from what I wrote:

Gabriel: “You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus.”

Bruce: “What! That’s not possible! I’m a man. Even if it did happen, what would I say to people? No one would believe me. I’d be a freak. I’d have newspapers hounding me, photographers stalking me, scientists poking me with needles, friends looking at me strangely or leaving me altogether. I’d have to go away for a year, where no one could see me.” (It suddenly hit me that this was exactly what it was like for Mary!)

Gabriel: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

Bruce: “Huh! This is just what I’ve been praying for: more of the Holy Spirit in my life. But this is not what I expected!”

Where Mary says, “I am the Lord’s servant; may it happen to me as you have said,” this is how I put it in my words:

Bruce: “OK, Lord, bring it on. I’m not ready; I’ll likely never be ready, so we might as well do it now. I’m not ready, but I am willing. I trust you, God. I’ve said that so many times; now here’s a chance to show that I mean it.”

That is still how I try to live. I invite, encourage and challenge all of you to say “Yes” to God as well.

I invite you to join me in this prayer: “I am available; I am willing; I am the Lord’s servant.”

Next Steps:

- Pray that again: “I am available; I am willing; I am the Lord’s servant.” No, don’t just roll the words off your tongue. *Pray* it. Think about what you’re saying.
- Then be quiet, and see what God brings to your mind.
- Now comes the test: *Did you really mean it?* If yes, then do it.