

What's the Big Deal about Mary?

Message for Sunday, December 24, 2017
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 1:26-56

Children's Message: I've got *great* news for you! You have to shovel all the snow out of the church parking lot! Wow, won't that be fun?

Maybe that's not your idea of fun. OK, help me. What kind of announcement *would* be good news for you? [*listen to ideas*].

In the Bible, Mary received an announcement of good news. The angel said to her, "The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you." So what was the good news for Mary? "You're going to have a baby!"

-) Even though you're not married
-) Even though you're only about fourteen years old

At first, Mary was shocked. "How can this be?", she asked?

After the angel explained it, and she finally understood, she said, "OK, let's do it."

Mary shows us what it means to trust God.

Message "What's the big deal about Mary?"

The year was 1979. I was living in Bolivia in South America, learning what life is like for people there. But I learned something else while I was there. I was astonished at the number of villages which were named after the Virgin Mary. There was the "Virgin of this" and the "Virgin of that," "Santa Maria this" and "Santa Maria that." While I was vaguely aware that the Roman Catholic Church held Mary, the mother of Jesus, in high esteem, I had no idea of the absolute devotion that millions of people have for her.

Although Roman Catholics do not worship Mary (that is reserved for God alone), she is venerated far above any other human. Here are some of their special beliefs and traditions.

- The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception says that Mary was miraculously conceived without

the stain of the sin which has infected all humankind (also known as "original sin").

- The doctrine of Perpetual Virginity says that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life; i.e. she and Joseph never had sexual relations. They say that the Bible passages about Jesus' brothers are poor translations, and actually refer to his cousins.
- The doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary says that after she died and was buried, she was taken into heaven, body and soul. (When her tomb was later opened, it was found to be empty, and this seemed the best explanation).
- The practices of saying the Hail Mary and the Rosary focus on asking Mary for help in praying to the Father. (They explain that it's like asking a friend to pray for you.)

If you're like me and you've never given this much thought, the question that begs to be asked is: what's the big deal about Mary?

Let's go back to the beginning, in the first chapter of Luke's gospel.

God sent the angel Gabriel to deliver a message to Mary. He began by praising her.

Luke 1:28, Today's English Version:

The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" ¹

Remember that in the Bible, angels are fearsome creatures in shining white; they have almost nothing in common with how they are portrayed in medieval paintings or in modern TV shows. With that kind of visitor and those kind of words, it's not surprising that Mary was taken aback.

Luke 1:29-33, Today's English Version:

Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor

¹ This verse, in an ancient translation, provides the first words of the *Hail Mary*: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus,
but to trust and obey.

The angel sought to reassure her as he delivered the message. Again, as I try to imagine what would be going through Mary's mind, all I can think of is pure and utter confusion. It would be like us answering the doorbell and finding a courier delivering a priceless piece of jewellery that we never ordered: "Uh, I think you must have the wrong address."

Martin Luther once said, "The greatest miracle was not that Mary conceived, but that she believed."

Mary points out the obvious source of her confusion.

Mary had her own plans for her life. She had been planning to marry soon, to settle down and raise a family. Little did she know that by saying "Yes" to God, that she would soon be running for her life to Egypt, to escape from King Herod who wanted to kill her baby.

Luke 1:34-37, Today's English Version:

Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do."

When you or I say "Yes" to God, there is risk involved. We ~~may~~ *will* be called to stand up for what is right and to confront what is wrong. We will be called to sacrifice. We will be called to change our lifestyle, to adopt different values, different priorities. When we say "Yes" to God, there is no way to know where he will lead us.

Mary is not giving excuses, trying to escape from this situation.² She is simply trying to understand this dizzying scenario which has just been placed in her lap.

But that is precisely where being a Christian is worth it. A life of selfish ambition, a life of ease and pleasure will never satisfy. We were made for greater things than those toys.

After the angel explained how it was all going to happen—by the power of God; and with God, nothing is impossible—then Mary willingly went along.

Writer Philip Yancey once made a fascinating observation about finding fulfillment. In his career as a writer and journalist he has interviewed a wide range of people. He divides these people into two groups: stars and servants. For the stars — super star athletes, famous authors, TV personalities — he has only sympathy. "These idols," he says, "are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met." According to the standards of this age these people have it made. They are famous, they have their pictures in magazines, they live in big, expensive homes. Some of us wish we were just like them. We don't see the troubled marriages, the tormented psyches, the incurable self-doubts.

Luke 1:38, Today's English Version:

"I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said."

For me, that's the big deal about Mary. She epitomizes what it means to submit to God. She is an inspiration to everyone who has ever wanted to ask God, "What in the world is happening to me?" She could be the basis for that popular gospel song,

Trust and obey,

Yancey contrasts the life-styles of these stars with a group he calls servants. Servants include such folks as relief workers in Bangladesh and language experts scattered through the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages. "I was prepared to honour and admire these servants," Yancey writes, "to uphold them as inspiring examples. I was not prepared to envy them." But envy them he did. As he reflected on the

² You may recall how Moses responded when God told him to confront Pharaoh, and tell him to let his people go. Moses weaselled out of it by putting up one excuse after another, until God finally got fed up with him [Exodus 3:10 – 4:14].

two groups, stars and servants, he concludes that “the servants clearly emerge as the favoured ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, ‘wasting’ their talents among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them.”³

Mary shows us the way to live: to be a servant, to obey God, no matter what. That’s the big deal.

Next Steps:

-) Imagine yourself saying to God, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.”
Go ahead, try it!
-) Now imagine yourself saying that as a regular part of your prayers. Instead of presenting God with your list of what he is supposed to do, present yourself as a willing servant.

³ In Philip Yancey’s book *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, pages 57.-58.