

Sermon for Sunday, December 15, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GOD IN SEARCH OF A MARY"

St. Luke 1:26-38

Text: "And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.'" And the angel departed from her." St. Luke 1:38

The first point I want to make this morning is this: God always acts through individuals. When the time came to create for himself a people, he reached down to touch one lone man, Abraham. When the moment came to bring his people out of bondage and to lead them to the promised land, he called out a single individual, Moses. When the time came to create a great nation, he touched a young shepherd lad named David. So it always was. When the time for action came, God used people. We should not be surprised, then, that when the time came for the Messiah to be born that God would use people. But the thing that does surprise us is the sort of people God chooses to use. For example, when God's time for the Christian church came, there was no more unlikely lot than the disciples. None of them were men of reputation and all of them had backgrounds of a very common sort. And when the going got tough and the danger was so thick you could cut it with a knife, the Bible says that they forsook Jesus and fled. Even after the resurrection, they didn't know quite what to do so they went off on a fishing trip. Yet, God took the very ordinary and did something extraordinary. He took those men and they -- as one critic in the book of Acts complained -- turned the world up-side-down.

So, God is hard to figure out. He takes unlikely people and does incredible things. And when we come to the story of the birth of Jesus, God's selection for a mother is rather unlikely. She is a simple peasant girl and how does it happen that she of all the young women of the world is chosen for this honor? Think of the magnitude of this moment in history! God has waited for this particular time in the history of the world to make a fuller revelation of Himself to mankind. He is ready now to send his own son into the world to purchase the salvation of men and to establish a kingdom of righteousness and peace. Because he is God, he can send Jesus in any wonderful way He may choose, but he will send him as a little child to live in a human home. And since God chooses this way, there must be a mother for the child. What an astonishing thing, to be chosen of God for such a task. Someone has said that when God wanted to give us music he didn't hand us a book of scales. Rather he wrapped a song in feathers, sat it on a brach and bade it to sing. And when he wanted to give us a saviour, he wrapped him in human flesh to be born of a mother. What will God look for in the young woman he chooses to be the mother of the Christ-child? Does he require a woman of wealth? A lady of great beauty? A woman of special education?

When God wanted to create a people, he chose a wandering Armenian, an unlikely selection; when he was ready to bring his people out of Egypt, he picked a stuttering herdsman, a strange choice; when he needed a king to build a mighty nation, he picked a young shepherd boy, a surprising thing. And when he needed a mother for the Christ-child, he picked a peasant girl named Mary. And the only clue we have is what the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." That is the first characteristic about Mary I would call to your attention.

Dare I ask this morning if God can use us? God acts through people, and people become great because of God acting through them, but God acts through those who find favor with him. Are you in favor with God this morning? What does it mean to be in favor with God? What did the angel mean when he said that Mary had found favor with God?

Well, the Bible doesn't specify, but could we guess? First, it would require a knowledge of God's word. When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, she breaks into what is known as the "Magnificat." And in that beautiful speech to Elizabeth, Mary reveals her deep and profound knowledge of scripture, of the promises of God, of the history of Israel. In years to come, when we find the boy Jesus in the temple, he is already deeply aware of scripture. Later, when he enters upon his ministry, he meets his initial temptation with scripture. Surely it would not be far wrong to surmise that he learned it first at his mother's knee. But not only did Mary know the scriptures, she must have lived a pure and holy life. When her cousin Elizabeth is described, the Bible tells us that she and her husband "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless..." And if John the Baptist was to have a mother of such purity and righteousness, how much more must Mary have been righteous before God.

So, we can say with certainty that Mary knew God through his word and she lived a pure and holy life in obedience to that word. God is always working through people, therefore he is always in search of a Mary - in search of someone through whom he can act. But God can act best through people who know his word and who are obedient to it. Dare we ask ourselves this morning that if God went in search of another Mary, could he use us? Are our lives holy lives, lived in obedience to the Word of God?

But there is a second characteristic about Mary that I would call to your attention. She surrendered herself to God's will. Mary did not have to be the mother of Jesus. She could have refused. And certainly she was aware of all of the problems that would result when the angel described what would happen. She could have called a stop to the whole thing right there. You see, God never over-rides human freedom. God never makes us do things we don't want to do. That is a limit God puts on himself. A man has to be willing to surrender, willing to serve. At that point in her life, the Bible tells us Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

So God chooses to act through people, and he acts best through Holy people who find favor with him. But He cannot and will not act without their consent, their willingness, their surrender. Dare we ask ourselves how willing we are this morning? When it gets right down to it, how much sacrifice and suffering are we willing to endure for the Lord? When Mary surrendered and submitted herself to God, she exposed herself to all sorts of dangers. According to Jewish law, if Joseph rejected her she was subject to being stoned to death. Yet, in a simple trust of God she made an act of surrender, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord." And as we look back, God always acted through people who surrendered. I am reminded of Isaiah at a critical time in the history of Israel as he stood in the temple and the vision of God filled the temple and God said, "Whom shall we send and who shall go for us?" In an act of surrender Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me." And here is Mary down on her knees before the angel - Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

We live in a time in which we desperately need fresh acts of God among us. We live in a time in which men and women are in spiritual crisis and who need to be touched by God. But God always reaches out to us through people and what God needs today to touch his world are brave men and women who will surrender themselves to him - surrender no matter what the cost, putting their trust in God. God is always in search of a Mary who will put herself or himself at his disposal and say, "Let it be to me according to your word."

There is a third thing about Mary that I want to share with you. Over the years of my ministry, I have preached about Christmas for several Sundays for each of twenty years. Yet, each year I discover things I never saw before or thought about before. This year is no exception for as I read and studied our text for this morning a sentence jumped out at me that I had never considered before. It is the last sentence of our text for this morning. There we read, "And the angel departed from her." Suddenly it struck me that for as long as Jesus was to live, Mary would never see the angel again. She had much trouble and sorrow before her. By the time Jesus begins his ministry, Joseph is apparently dead for after the experience in the temple when Jesus was 12, the Bible never mentions Joseph again. We must assume that at some time in between, Joseph died and Mary was left to finish raising Jesus and his brothers and sisters alone. During the years of his brief ministry, as he was persecuted and hounded, she was to know agony that any mother experiences when a child is in trouble. And then, finally, she was to stand at the foot of his cross and watch with breaking heart as her crucified son perished. Who can guess the despair and hurt that racked her body to see a son thus die. But the angel never came again.

You know, if God is always speaking to us, always appearing in miraculous ways, perhaps we could endure the worst that life could bring. If we lived on some spiritual mountain top in the very presence of the hosts of heaven, if we heard the daily sound of the angels singing, how inspired we would be to live for Jesus. But the Bible says that the angel departed from Mary.

How many visions must a man have to be faithful? How many manifestations of the Lord must come? How many appearances of the divine must we have? Just the other day I stood in a hospital room with a dear friend. His wife is critically ill. She is in a coma, she cannot talk. As we prayed together he leaned over her bed and there was on his face such love and concern and compassion. But I saw something else there too. I saw deep pain and I thought how much easier it would be if he could enter this experience with the very angels singing about him and the Glory of God shining down. Then he could handle it. But the angels departed. Mary had only one such vision. In the light of that one moment in time, she lived out the rest of her years in faith and obedience and endured all that life brought her. She trusted God and the Bible tells us that she kept all the things of the announcement of the angel in her heart. In the light of that vision she remained faithful to the end.

Is there some moment in your life that stands out in your memory when you encountered the living Lord? I suspect that practically all of us this morning have some such experience. In the light of that encounter, are we living faithful lives, obedient in the midst of the worst that life can do? How many visions must we have to be faithful? How many angels must we hear singing to remain loyal to the end? Are we not fortunate indeed to have even one? And we should live life in the light of that encounter with God, keeping it in our hearts as Mary did. God will not continue to give us such visions, he expects us to believe him, to trust him, and to live life in the faith of that moment when he touched us.

One of our modern poets has written of Mary this little poem:

Mary, when that little child
Lay upon your heart at rest,
Did the thorns, Maid-mother mild,
Pierce your breast?

Mary, when that little child
Softly kissed your cheek benign,
Did you know, O Mary mild,
Judas' sign?

Mary, when that little child
cooed and prattled at your knee,
Did you see with heartbeat wild,
Calvary?

R. Trumbull

No, life was not easy for Mary and the angel had departed. Yet, she was obedient to the end.

How our world today needs Jesus! Yet, he comes to the world through people - people like Mary who find favor with God; people like Mary who surrender to God's will; people like Mary who - when the angel departs - remain faithful to the vision that God gave. Yes, our world needs Jesus and God is always in search of people like Mary. As God comes to touch his world with love again, he comes in search of a Mary. Can he touch his world with love through you?

How many visions must a man have to be faithful? How many appearances of the Lord must come? How many appearances of the living Lord? I suspect that practically all of us who remain have some such experiences. In the light of that experience, and we living faithful lives, obedient in the light of the vision that life can be, how many visions must we have to be faithful? For now again we hear singing to remain loyal to the end? And we not forsake indeed to have our own? And we should live life in the light of that experience with God, keeping it in our hearts as Mary did. God will not continue to give us such visions, he expects us to believe him, to trust him, and to live life in the faith of that vision when he touched us.

One of our modern poets has written of Mary this little poem.

Mary, when that little child
lay upon your breast at rest,
Did the dream of Calvary
throb your breast?