

Faith and Doubt - Luke 1:26-56
Argyle – 12/4/16 – 52 Key Bible Stories
Second Sunday in Advent

Introduction to Worship

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to explain how she was going to become the mother of the Messiah, she had some doubts and questions. What doubts and questions do you have as you come to worship this morning? As we prepare for worship, tell God what your doubts and questions. Ask him for clarity and wonder as you worship.

Introduction to Scripture

In this morning's Scripture passage we are going to get a behind the scenes look at some of the details of Jesus' birth. We are going to be reading about an incredible conversation that took place between Jesus' mother and the angel Gabriel about her impending pregnancy. It's incredible, first of all, because it was a conversation between an angel and a human. But more than that, it's incredible because it tells us just about everything we need to know about Jesus and his mission. I've asked three ladies from the Thursday morning woman's Bible study to help me read this passage. (Read - no projection) (Pray)

This passage begins with Mary being "greatly troubled" and ends with her singing God's praises. I want to trace how she got from here to there, to see what we can learn about faith.

Mary Was Greatly Troubled

As I mentioned, Mary was greatly troubled. Who could blame her? There are several accounts of angels appearing to people in the Bible and “greatly troubled” seems to be the typical response. Mary was a devout believer, but talking to angels was not one of her regular spiritual disciplines. Even Gabriel’s greeting - “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” - didn’t assure her. Mary’s ultimate response to Gabriel’s appearance and message is inspiring, but I don’t want us to miss where she started from.

If you think about it, there is a lot that is troubling about the message of Jesus’ birth, starting with Gabriel. We have grown up in a culture that doesn’t believe in the supernatural. Science has taught us that angels don’t exist. And, on top of that, virgin births don’t happen. Reading about those things can be troubling. But it is not just the supernatural stuff that gives us problems. There is all the talk about Mary’s baby being a Savior. He is given the name, “Jesus,” because he will save his people from their sins. It’s troubling to hear that we are sinners who need a Savior. And then there is the expectation that we need to give up control of our lives to this Jesus. That, too, is troubling.

Any honest look at the details of Jesus’ birth and the content of his message is going to leave us “deeply troubled” just like Mary was. Notice what Mary did next.

Mary Asked A Question

She could have run or thrown Gabriel out or tried to deny what she was seeing, but instead Mary asked a question. Gabriel had explained to Mary that she was going to give birth to a son. He told her what to name him and how important he would be. I don't know if Gabriel just paused at this point or if Mary had to stop him to ask her question. "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Good questions!

We know that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. That meant that she was legally committed to marrying him. It is a little bit like our practice of engagement, except that it was legally binding. A betrothal could only be broken by divorce. Since God prohibits sexual relations before marriage, a believing couple like Joseph and Mary would not engage in sex before they were married. So, it was impossible for Mary to get pregnant at that point. So she asked Gabriel a logical question.

Some people wonder if it is okay to have doubts and ask God questions. It depends. God seems okay with Mary's doubts and questions, but people are quick to point out that earlier in Luke 1 God seems to have a problem with doubts and questions. Shortly before he appeared to Mary, Gabriel appeared to a priest named Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife were going to have a baby. Gabriel seemed to be on a baby announcement tour. That baby, by the way, turned out to be John the Baptist. Zechariah, also, asked Gabriel a question. He said, "How can

I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” Do you see the subtle difference between Zechariah’s “How can I be sure of this?” and Mary’s “How can this be?” Zechariah seemed to challenge God’s ability to do what he said he was going to do. Mary simply wanted to know how it can happen.

God welcomes our questions and doubts as long as they are focused on understanding him and his ways. On the other hand, he has no tolerance for arrogant challenges to his authority and abilities. If we are starting from the presupposition that God can’t do something, our questions won’t be answered and our doubts won’t be satisfied. Honest doubts and questions, however, are always welcomed as we see with Mary.

Mary Submitted to God’s Plan

After Gabriel answered her question, Mary submitted to God’s plan. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Pay attention to those words, because they express the attitude that God wants from all of us.

I doubt Gabriel’s answer helped Mary to understand what was going to happen. She wanted to know how she could become pregnant since she was a virgin. His explanation - “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Gabriel went on to add, “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God.” Mary would have known of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s disappointment over not being able to

have children. Gabriel's referencing of them and hearing that Elizabeth was pregnant would have been significant to Mary. Although she didn't understand how it was going to happen and although she knew that it was going to be embarrassing and difficult, Mary was ready to submit to God's plan. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said?"

What is keeping you from submitting to God's plan for your life? What can you learn from Mary?

Mary Sought Support From Other Believers

I love what Mary did next. This is something we are often reluctant to do. Mary sought support from other believers. After her encounter with Gabriel, Mary went to stay Elizabeth and Zechariah who were fellow believers and relatives of hers. Processing all that Gabriel had told her must have been overwhelming for Mary. Although she was a virgin, she was going to have a baby and not just a baby, but a king who was the Son of God. I would guess that after Gabriel left her Mary had more questions and began to wonder about what she heard. Talking it over with Elizabeth and Zechariah would be helpful. She couldn't have anticipated how helpful and clarifying that visit would be.

As soon as she saw Mary, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth proclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my

ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

What a confirmation of Gabriel’s message to her and of Mary’s faith! Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth testified that Mary’s child was blessed and was her Lord. And she affirmed Mary for believing God’s message to her through Gabriel.

I am always personally moved in this passage by the image of the unborn John leaping for joy at the presence of the unborn Jesus. I did an internet search to see if any artist had ever tried to depict this scene. (Picture) I found this picture of a wall painting in the church of Timios Stavros in Cyprus which was done in the 14th century. In this picture John isn’t leaping, but bowing down to Jesus.

When God calls us to himself, he calls us into a family - his church. For our new members’ class this week, we looked up a number of verses on how we are to treat one another in the church. I call these the “one another” verses and there are a lot of them. You can use biblegateway.com to look them up. We are to love one another, forgive one another, bear with one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, be devoted to one another, honor one another, accept one another, instruct one another, serve one another, be compassionate with one another, submit to one another, admonish one another, offer hospitality to one another and spur one another on to love and good deeds. The church is a “one another” entity. There is a lot of support here, but we need to seek it out by pursuing relationships with one

another and being transparent with one another. Think of the support Mary would have missed out on if she hadn't sought out Elizabeth and Zechariah. What are you doing to develop support with other believers?

Mary Praised God

The last thing Mary did in this episode is praised God. “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.” In his little book, *Hidden Christmas*, Tim Keller says that every Christian is able to say this. He wrote, “I would argue that despite the unique features of Mary’s situation, we should all be amazed that we are Christians and that God is working in us.” That should lead us to glorify and rejoice in God.

We learn from Mary a little about how to do that. As one commentator put it, Mary’s song is “saturated with Old Testament concepts and phrases.” She obviously knew her Bible well and used it in praising God. She remembered what God had done and what that revealed about his character. He was merciful and powerful and compassionate and faithful. He had a special concern for the humble and the poor.

As you reflect on how God has been working in your life recently, does it lead you to praise him? Why not write your own song of praise starting with “My

soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant?”

Conclusion

The stages of faith that Mary went through are helpful in figuring out just where we are in our Christian journey. Is there something about God that is troubling us? Do we have honest questions for God? Although we may not have all the answers, are we willing to submit to God’s plan for our lives? If so, are we seeking out the support of other believers? And when we think of how blessed we are to have received new life through Christ, are we overflowing with praise?

Good questions for us to reflect on as we come to the Lord’s Table. In the Lord’s Table we remember, celebrate and submit to the One who Gabriel announced and who the unborn John the Baptist recognized and who Mary gave birth to; the One named Jesus who saves his people from their sins, whose is coming back and whose reign will never end.

Our souls glorify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servants. The Mighty One has done great things for us—holy is his name!