

## Who Wants to Be Mary?

Luke 1:26-38

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2015]

### I

The music director at a particular church was filling the various parts in the church's annual Christmas pageant.

There was a group of girls ages seven, eight and nine.

The music director said to them, "Who wants to be Mary?"

All the would-be Mary's eagerly raised their hands,  
each wanting the chance to stand up front with a (probably uncomfortable)  
young Joseph and hold the baby Jesus doll.

After a bit of deliberation, the director chose a second-grader named Sophie.

Sophie's eyes opened wide and she whispered in joyful disbelief, "Me?"

As you can imagine, the other girls were disappointed.

Elizabeth, also a second-grader, was told that she could be a lamb.

She was silent for a moment as her face frowned;  
then she looked at one of the pageant coordinators.

"Well," she asked suspiciously, "what does the lamb do?"

### II

Everybody wants to be Mary,  
and everyone seems to look up to Mary,  
especially at Christmas time.

The Roman Catholic Church considers Mary the *Mater Dei*,  
the sinless Mother of God.

The Easter Orthodox Church refers to her as *Theotokos*, God-bearer.

Protestants don't go quite so far, but most of us probably consider her a pretty good role model of faith and obedience.

So at the least, everyone looks up to Mary,  
and many want to be like her.

But the question before us this morning is, *did Mary want to be Mary?*

This is one of the key questions of our gospel lesson, Luke 1:26-38.

The angel Gabriel appears to announce to Mary the amazing news that she is the chosen one who will give birth to God's Son.

*"Greetings, favored one!"* Gabriel says. *"The Lord is with you."*

At first, Mary's response is one of incredulity.

Verse 29 says:

*But she was much perplexed by his words, and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

Other translations say she was "greatly troubled" (NIV), "thoroughly shaken" (The Message) or "confused and disturbed." (NLT)

And who wouldn't be?

Imagine you're 14 or 15 years old and an angel shows up to tell you that you're going to give birth to God's Son.

How do you imagine you would respond?

The angel Gabriel understood Mary's confusion, because he goes on to say,

*Do not be afraid, Mary,*

Have you noticed how in the Bible angels are always telling people not to be afraid?

Eugene Peterson in “The Message” paraphrases Gabriel’s words this way:

*“Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.”*

Then the angel tells her that this child would be the Son of God,  
that he would inherit the throne of King David,  
and that he would rule over a kingdom that had no end.

What amazing news for a young girl to receive!

And yet think of the danger and the risk that this proposition posed to Mary.

Once the villagers heard of her pregnancy, she would at the least be shunned and at the worst she could be stoned to death.

Without a man to provide for her she would have no way of supporting herself and the baby.

She faced shame, ridicule, poverty, even death.

Herod the Great, who ruled as “king” with Rome’s support, would not have been very keen on another trying to claim David’s throne and title.

And the designation “son of god” was claimed by Roman emperors.

Anyone else acclaimed as a “son of god” by the populace was very likely to end up on a cross instead of a throne.

If Gabriel’s message means anything, it means that Mary’s world will be turned upside down.

Given those circumstances,  
who would want to be Mary?

### III

So at first Mary is perplexed,

but then her perplexity turns to wonderment at how it will be possible  
for a virgin to conceive and give birth.

*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*

There's a lot to absorb here...a lot of information.

You have found favor...

you will bear a child...

you will give him the name Jesus...

he will be the Son of God, the Holy One.

Wow!

Have you ever been in this situation?

You go to the doctor's office.

The doctor has news for you—

a diagnosis, or a condition,

maybe to tell you you're pregnant.

The news is so big that you don't actually take in all that the doctor is  
saying.

You get home later that day and someone says to you,

"So, what's the news," and you're not really sure?

You got stuck at one part and didn't hear all of it.

Or maybe it was a promotion or being fired—

or something so huge that you just can't take it in all at once—

like when John F. Kennedy was assassinated...

or when 9/11 happened...

or some other astounding event.

We have all had moments of stupefied amazement in our lives.

That's where I see Mary at this point in the story.

In amazement and wonder she wants to know the mechanics of this thing.

How's it going to be played out on the ground?

The angel is talking *Son of the most high* and she's wondering who she has to sleep with.

Talk about missing the point.

But isn't that just natural?

If you can't deal with the whole picture,  
you pick the part you can hold onto,  
and you focus on it.

For Mary it was conception:  
she knows how it's supposed to work,  
and she wants details.

The angel goes on to tell her that this child will be the result of God's action.

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
the power of the Highest will hover over you;*

*Therefore the child you bring to birth  
will be called Holy, Son of God.*

Mary is the only one in the history of the world who had to make this particular decision.

She was chosen to be *Theotokos*,  
God-bearer,  
who agreed to carry,  
give birth to,  
nurse,  
and raise the Son of God.

Only one person was ever chosen to do that.

We tend to think, what a great thing that Mary was the one chosen.

And yet think of the burden she would have to bear throughout her life.

What would it have done to Mary if she knew everything that would happen to her Son?

What if, while she cradled her baby, she knew all about the cross?

It would kill any mother to have that much light about her child.

What would have happened if you,  
when you were a child,  
knew everything that was going to happen in your life?

All the mistakes you would make.

All the overwhelming responsibility you would be given.

All the heartache you would endure.

You would have never left your mother's womb!

Too much light will blind those of us who have grown accustomed to living in a dark world.

As the psalmist says, God's "word is a lamp unto our feet  
and a light unto our path."

It is like those little lights along a sidewalk at night:  
they give just enough light for the next step.

No wonder Mary is perplexed...  
no wonder she questions how these things can be.

#### IV

Friends, if you were God and planned to change the world,  
whom would you choose?

In a world ruled by men, you would certainly choose a man.

In a world ruled by Rome, you would probably choose a Roman.

But God chose a Jewish peasant girl to bear the Savior of the world.

It would be hard to imagine someone less important by the standards of Mary's world,

and really, if we are honest, even by the standards of our world.

But Mary became the most important woman in the history of the world because she was God's choice.

We can't help but wonder why,

out of all the young women in Israel,

Mary was the one chosen to bear the Messiah.

Was it her piety,

her devotion,

her faithfulness,

her love for Torah,

her willingness to be obedient to God?

And whereas we might think:

*What a great thing that Mary was the one who was favored, chosen by God for this great honor,"*

don't ever lose sight of what a mixed blessing it was.

We assume that those whom God favors will enjoy the things we equate with the good life—

social standing,

wealth,

good health.

Yet Mary, God's favored one, would likely face the scorn of her fellow villagers.

She would be blessed with having a child out of wedlock who would later be executed as a criminal.

She would have to make that long, difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and give birth to her son far from home in less than ideal surroundings.

According to Matthew's version of the story, she would have to flee with the baby and Joseph to Egypt in order to avoid the blood-thirstiness of Herod.

She would experience early widowhood, poverty, obscurity.

She would see her son tortured and nailed to a Roman cross.

If this is what it means to be chosen by God, you can have it!

And yet, God's choice of Mary helps us to remember that acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God's blessing.

And if God could favor one such as Mary to receive this message and give birth to the Messiah,  
then, who knows, God might just favor you or me.

God might just entrust you with a great call and a great burden,  
something that will require your whole self,  
but something that,  
when it is born,  
just might change the world.

## V

With all this as context, how could Mary want to be Mary?

But here is the good news: **Mary is not alone in her doubt and struggle.**

Think of all the people of the Bible who were chosen by God,  
and not a single one of them would have been your choice or mine.

*Noah was a drunk.*

*Abraham and Sarah were too old.*

*Isaac was a daydreamer.*

*Jacob was a cheat and a liar.*

*Leah was ugly.*



*Joseph was a tattletale.*

*Moses had a stuttering problem.*

*Gideon was afraid.*

*Samson was a womanizer.*

*Rahab was a prostitute.*

*Jeremiah was too young.*

*David had an affair and was a murderer.*

*Elijah was suicidal.*

*Isaiah preached naked.*

*Jonah ran from God.*

*Naomi was a widow.*

*Job went broke.*

*Peter denied Christ.*

*The disciples fell asleep while praying.*

*Martha worried too much.*

*The Samaritan woman was divorced.*

*Zacchaeus was too short.*

*Paul was too zealous.*

*Timothy had an ulcer.*

*Lazarus was dead.*

### **And you seriously think God can't use you?**

There is a reason why we emphasize those individuals in the Bible who struggle or who fail or who are filled with doubts.

These stories are a comfort because they remind us that we are not alone in our struggles and our doubts.

We are not the only ones who want to escape or to raise hard questions.

Fortunately, Mary's story does not end at verse 29,  
with her being perplexed.

Nor does it end at verse 34,  
when she wonders how these things will be.

Now it is up to her.

What will be her answer?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

*Just because God sends an angel to invite one girl onto the dance floor is no guarantee she will say yes.*

*Just because God sends a prophet to tell us how life on earth can be more like life in heaven does not mean any of us will quit our day jobs to make it so.*

*God acts. Then it is our turn. God responds to us. Then it is our turn again.*

At verse 38, Mary's turn comes—  
she humbly submits to God's choice:

*Yes, I see it all now:*

*I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.*

*Let it be with me*

*just as you say. (The Message)*

I love how the great Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner describes the scene:

*“She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he’d been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.*

*“He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said.*

*“As he said this, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”*

Mary claims—  
fiercely claims—  
God’s calling as her own.

**Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.**

## VI

Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox...  
all look to Mary as the exemplar of faith,  
the model for all Christians in all times and places  
of humble submission to the will of God.

But I am grateful today that she was perplexed,  
that she was confused,  
and that God chose someone like her to bear the good news.

Why? Because it blesses our perplexity.

Aren’t you and I uncertain much of the time?

We don’t have all the answers.

We find ourselves perplexed and confused.

We wonder how it all is supposed to be.

But if the mother of God struggled in this way—  
guess what?—  
so can you.

**Who wants to be Mary?**

**Who wouldn't want to be...  
now that you know that nothing is impossible with God!**

Amen.

Sources:

Christian Coon, "Who Wants to Be Mary," *The Christian Century*, December 15, 2008, retrieved from <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2008-12/who-wants-be-mary>.

Christopher L. Webber, Advent 2015, The Gift of New Hope, Abingdon, 2015, 69.