

Mary, Model of Faith
Luke 1:26-38, Advent 4, 12/21/14
Pastor Judy Bangsund

Of the newer Christmas carols, one of my favorites is called, “Mary, Did You Know?” It has been featured in a couple of our children’s Christmas programs over recent years and it always captures my attention. Here are some of the lyrics:

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would one day walk on water?
...that he would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your Baby Boy has come to make you new?
This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you.

Mary did you know... The blind will see. The deaf will hear. The dead will live again.
The lame will leap. The dumb will speak....

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy is Lord of all creation?
...that he would one day rule the nations?
Did you know? The sleeping Child you’re holding *is* the Great *I Am*.

Great song. Of course, the question, “Did you know?” is rhetorical. Mary didn’t know these things. She may have wondered in some vague fashion, what it would mean to raise the Son of God. But details? She *couldn’t* know those things; she wasn’t told. All she knew is basically what you and I can know from Scripture itself. But you know what? Mary heard God’s word and trusted him. Mary is a model of faith.

Mary is an important figure in the New Testament and (I would say) an even greater figure in the history of the Church. And there’s something wrong with that statement. Mary features prominently in Scripture, from the time of Gabriel’s appearance to the time of Jesus’ death. But Church history has made a much greater to-do about Mary than Scripture does itself.

So why *is* Mary important? Well, not because she is somehow more *holy* than anyone else. Scripture says nothing about the circumstances of her own birth. It says nothing about praying to her (in fact, Scripture is pretty clear about praying to God alone). She is not a part of the godhead – we believe in the Trinity, right? (Three persons, one God). Not 4 persons (a Quadity?). And yet, she has been placed far above other mortals in some parts of Church tradition. So much so that in the 7th century, when Mohammed the Prophet approached the Church seeking the truth, he came away with a big misunderstanding. He thought Christians worshiped three gods, not one; and that they were the Father, the Son, and the Mother. This did not strike Mohammed to be the truth, in part because he was convinced that there was only One God. (He was monotheistic.) And so he took his search elsewhere. (I wonder: what would the world look like today, if Mohammed had been given a clear witness to the truth?) In so many ways, the Church today bears a heavy burden, because the witness given to Mohammed and to many, many others has been skewed on the position of Mary.

The Bible doesn’t show Mary being more holy than anyone else. Nor does her importance lie in being a model mother or woman, although that could be argued. I mean, there is a lot to

commend her, right? She raised the Son of God, after all (and he turned out pretty good). She raised other children too. However, Scripture says almost nothing about her child-rearing techniques – other than the glimpse we are given when Jesus was 12 and stayed behind in Jerusalem. We just don't know much about Mary as a mother. Nor do we know much about her as a woman, whether she was a leader or anything like that. What we do know is that she persevered in a very difficult situation. She was an unwed mother. Joseph nearly divorced her. And yet, she didn't give up. That takes a strong woman, especially at that time. But, while Mary was likely a remarkable woman and mother, this is not why we remember her; this is not why she is important.

Scripture speaks for itself. It sets the record straight. Mary is important simply because she trusted God's word and obeyed it. She is a model of faith. The gospel writer, Luke, takes pains to point this out. Take a look at our text again.

Luke calls Mary "favored" and in other places, "blessed." And she was. But Luke shows us quite plainly that Mary was blessed, not because she would be Jesus' mother, but because she *believed*. If you keep reading Luke 1, you'll find that Mary's next step was to visit her cousin Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard her greeting, she was filled by the Holy Spirit and prophesied. One of the things she said was this: "Blessed is she who has *believed* that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (1:45). Mary believed the word of the angel with a simple, childlike faith. She accepted it as truth without trying to pin down every detail. She said simply, "Let it be to me as you have said."

Now, it was not likely that Mary was highly educated. That was a privilege given mostly to boys at that time. We do know she was familiar with the Old Testament, because of what she said to Elizabeth on that visit. Mary tells of God's mighty deeds, of his faithfulness to Abraham and to the nation of Israel. But Mary was not a biblical scholar. Let's face it: no one carried around a pocket Bible in those days. So Mary's importance was not based on how much she knew. It's not what you know but whom you trust, that counts.

Mary believed God. It was a simple, childlike faith -- the kind of faith that is accessible to all Christians, young or old, rich or poor, educated or not. Mary was the kind of faith-filled person that not only believed, but put God's word into practice. When Luke mentions Mary in later chapters, he makes this point. In chapter 8 Jesus is out preaching when his mother and brothers try to see him. Jesus replies, "My mother and brothers are those who *hear God's word and put it into practice*." Again, in chapter 11, Jesus is out preaching when a woman in the crowd calls out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." Jesus counters with this: "Blessed rather are those who *hear the word of God and obey it*." Jesus defines his family as those who hear God's word, believe it, and put it into practice.

This is what makes Mary important! Not that she was in any way more holy than any other mortal; not that she was a model mother or woman; but rather, that she trusted in God's word. She believed it, accepted it, and put herself into God's hands to be used by him.

Mary is a model of faith for all Christians. In your own life, you may be able to connect with Mary -- in several ways. First, she believed in the midst of uncertainty and trouble. The angel

delivered some shocking news, news which disrupted her world and caused her a great deal of trouble. As an unwed mother, she could have been shamed in her community, even stoned to death. God put her into a very awkward, if not dangerous, situation. But she never accused God of being unfair. Nor did she allow these difficulties to keep her inside, hiding. She didn't panic. Instead, she did what she could do, traveling to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant under impossible conditions. Think of it. Luke tells us that she was barren. And now she was old, past the age of pregnancy. And yet, she conceived – as the angel prophesied to her husband. At the time of Mary's visit, Elizabeth had entered her third trimester. The impossible had visibly become possible. Mary's faith had to have been strengthened by that. She saw with her own eyes that God keeps his word; that he is able to bring new life where no life is possible.

Faith wouldn't be faith if it only functioned in safe, comfortable and predictable situations. In Hebrews 11:1, we read, "... faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Mary models for us the kind of trust that operates when the going gets tough.

Second, Mary is a model for faith because she took the humble position of a servant. When the angel had explained everything to her, she simply responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me as you have said." God honors the humble. When you stop to think about it, it's the only reasonable position we can take before Almighty God.

The unexpected appearance of an angel was probably terrifying. The angel had to reassure her: "Don't be afraid." Mary was confused and even troubled by the angel's words. But despite fear and confusion, Mary listened to the angel and asked only one question. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She didn't challenge the angel nor question God's call; she simply asked for clarification. And once given an answer, she accepted the call with humility.

I wonder how a modern-day teenager would respond. How would *I* respond? Numerous questions? Reasons why this just wouldn't work? Perhaps a defiant, "No way!" wondering, "What is God thinking???" While Mary might certainly have wondered about potential problems, she voiced only faith. "I am your servant."

Servanthood is not highly touted these days. And yet, it is one of the traits most valued by God. It's high praise when God says, "This is my servant." That's what he called Abraham, Moses and David. "My servant." And at the end of the day, Mary's Son became the prime example of servanthood, giving his life humbly and obediently for you and me. Like his mother, Jesus said, "Your will be done."

Mary modeled a faith that trusted God in difficult times; she modeled servanthood, whatever the cost. And finally, Mary is a model for faith because she took one step at a time. Despite the enormity of the task God had given her, she simply did what was in front of her to do. In her case, the first step was to go see Elizabeth.

Perhaps you have been in a situation where the task you are given seems overwhelming. Mary was chosen to be the mother of God's Son, the Messiah -- a rather overwhelming task. She was just a young girl, one who lived simply. She had no knowledge of a world any bigger than her own small village. How could she possibly rear her son in such a way that he would be able to

rule the world? Impossible! But Mary simply accepted the task. From her, you and I can learn to just take the first step. Do what is in front of you to do, and do it in your own way. Give your fear over to God; his shoulders are quite broad. Recognize that *God* will fulfill his word. You don't have to do it for him.

As a Christian, you follow Jesus. You take up your own cross; you put him first. It's an enormous task, when you stop to think of it. How can you know what that means? How can you see it through to the end? You could be paralyzed by these questions, and never take the first step. Mary is your model. When you are called, give yourself over to his word in trust. Simply be willing to be used by him and he will show you the rest, one step at a time.

I'd like to finish with a modern-day parable. Henri Nouwen tells about a family of trapeze artists in a book entitled, *Sabbatical Journeys*. Nouwen was impressed by the special relationship that trapeze artists share with one another when performing. He had some friends known as the Flying Roudellas and they described to him what goes on between the flyer and the catcher. They told Nouwen that the flyer is the one that lets go, and the catcher is the one that catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. He arcs out into the air. His job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air.

One of the Roudellas told Nouwen, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher." The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but for the catcher to be able to do that, the flyer must let go and completely trust that he will be caught.

Mary trusted. She let go, knowing that God's strong hands would catch her. She is a model of faith. Hearing God's word, she believed. She offered herself to God as his servant. She took one step at a time, believing that God would accomplish his will. And God called her "favored one, blessed." It's the title he gives to all those who trust in him. Amen.