

“GOD’S CHOSEN ONE”

Luke 1:39-55

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

How good are you at keeping secrets? Can you be trusted with a confidence? When folks come to talk with us pastors, we are bound by our ministerial covenant not to share what is spoken to us in confidence. In fact, we cannot be required to testify in court concerning information shared with us in counseling sessions. It’s called the “seal of the confessional.” Your stories are safe with us!

It was the night before Mother’s Day, and I was at my desk making final preparations for the day to come. It was going to be a big day at church, and I wanted to have everything ready. My wife Barb was at our son and his wife’s home for the week-end. The house was quiet, and I was deep in thought. All of a sudden the phone rang. It was my son, Tim. He said he had some good news to share. “We’re going to have a baby,” he said. “That’s great news!” I responded. “Congratulations!”

He continued, “You can’t tell anyone! You can’t even discuss it with Mom. We’re going to tell her tomorrow after church when we take her out to dinner for Mother’s Day.” “O.K.,” I reluctantly agreed. “Your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell a soul.”

The next day was just agony! Do you know how hard it is not to share good news? Some of you can relate. Many of you know that Tim and Jennie have been married for seven years. Some of you asked on that very Mother’s Day morning, “How are your kids? Any news about grandchildren?” “Haven’t heard a word,” I said., hoping that God would forgive me for lying through my teeth! I was dying to tell somebody, anybody, everybody, but I had promised to keep a secret. After all, not even the child’s grandmother had heard the news!

Nicky Gumbull, on one of the Alpha videos, the class that introduces people to the Christian faith, tells about the birth of his first child. He was so excited, he got on the elevator and began to tell perfect strangers what had happened. I remember the night Tim was born, after 36 hours of labor. I went home from the hospital at three o’clock in the morning. I got the key to the church’s outdoor bulletin board and went out and took down the sermon title for Sunday and replaced it with three words: “**It’s a boy!**” I wanted the whole world to know.

What thoughts were racing through Mary’s mind that morning when the angel Gabriel visited her and told her that she was chosen by God to have a son, and that her son would have a special mission in this world? What thoughts flooded her mind as she prepared to go and visit her cousin Elizabeth and share the good news? Did she feel uncomfortable staying in her hometown where the gossip was thick? Or did she feel the need to share her story more widely, so that everyone would know that God had blessed her with the promise of a baby? At any rate, Mary traveled to see Elizabeth, and together they shared the good news — the best news that

either of them had ever heard!

What do two pregnant women have to talk about? Everything! Good news is meant to be shared! My mother used to go United Methodist Women's School of Christian Mission and come home sleep-deprived! She and her roommate would stay up half the night talking! Lest you think I'm being chauvinistic, when I go to a minister's conference, we men do the same thing!

Can you imagine — Elizabeth, bless her heart, middle-aged Elizabeth who thought she was cursed by God and would never have a child — now can feel the movement of a baby in her abdomen. And the child leaps for joy when Elizabeth hears that Mary is going to be the mother of Jesus, the Messiah. Here is Mary, a teenage girl. Pregnancy itself was overwhelming for her. After all, this had come as a total surprise. But more than having a child, Mary's child is going to be a special child. Mary has been chosen by God to be the mother of God's Messiah, the Savior of the world. My goodness, they had a lot to talk about!

Don't you suppose that Mary and Elizabeth did what any expectant parent does — daydream about who this is that we are about to give birth to — what they will become — how they might change the world? Will this tiny unborn child grow up to be the President of the United States? Will she be a famous doctor? Will he discover a cure for cancer? Will she be an influential preacher, leading thousands to the Lord? Will he further the human rights movement, be an ambassador, help bring peace to our troubled world?

Some of the commentators say that Mary's words reflect the idealism of a teenager, as though she had her head in the clouds and was not dealing with reality. If that's the case, thank God for teenage idealism! I remember so well the discussion group of teenagers I was leading at a summer camp at Lakeside. We were talking about our life goals. After several had shared, one of the boys said, "I know this sounds stupid, but I want to work for world peace." Well, it didn't sound stupid at all. God knows we need somebody; we need a lot of people to work for world peace.

Do you suppose that Jesus as a young child, was encouraged to be sensitive and care for the poor and marginalized and bring justice where there was none? I think he was. His mother envisioned that kind of life for him before he was born. His mother believed that he would change the course of world history. His mother believed that he was chosen by God to make a difference in the world. I believe my kids and my grandchildren are chosen by God to make a difference in the world, too. That's not teenage idealism. That's what the Bible tells me in the Gospel of Luke. That's what our faith is all about.

Mary was able to grasp that she had been sought out by God. It was difficult to understand; it was impossible to explain. So Mary does what we all do when we have news that's so good we have difficulty putting it into words, she puts it into a song!

We don't know what Mary's voice sounded like, but the words to her song have been recorded for all time: "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" That word "magnify" means "makes clear, enlarges, brings into focus, reveals." There are times when the confusing mass of images and impressions coalesce, come into focus, and we see. The veil is lifted, the lens come into focus and the fog lifts. As a pastor, I have had people say of their conversion to Christianity, "It was like the light came on and I finally saw what I had before only dimly thought."

In the movies, when something spiritual happens or there is a suggestion that God is

close, the camera goes out of focus and everything becomes fuzzy, vague and blurred. That's curious, because in my experience, when God gets close to people it's like things suddenly fall into place, become apparent, focused and certain.

When I was a Boy Scout, we used to take a magnifying glass and focus the sun's rays and burn our names into pieces of wood. If you use a magnifying glass to focus the sun on a piece of paper in the summertime, you can start a fire in just over a minute (Don't try this at home, kids!). Then there was the day in high school biology class when we put a bit of ordinary pond water between two pieces of glass. We put it under a microscope. We turned the little lever and peered into the glass. Wonder of wonders, there was a whole world there, teeming with life, organisms moving about. A whole world there, unknown to me, until the lens of the microscope revealed it before my eyes, magnified it for my limited vision.

So Mary sings, upon being told she is going to have a baby, "*My soul magnifies the Lord.*" Did she mean that the God who previously had been only a vague, abstract, distant suggestion became in that moment an engaging, embracing, loving reality? Did she mean that in that moment of her pregnancy she saw who God really was, that things came into focus? When Mary sang, "*My soul magnifies the Lord,*" was she saying, "I know have seen and experienced God in a larger, expanded way"?

Wonder of wonders, God chooses Mary, a simple peasant girl, to be the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Wonder of wonders, God chooses Charlie, a nobody from northeast Ohio, to preach the Gospel. Wonder of wonders, God comes to you, chooses you for a specific mission and purpose in the world. God comes to us individually, one person at a time. God pursues us, seeks us out, and calls us to a task that is designed, tailor-made, just for us.

Mary's song, while expressing joy in being chosen, also deals with the reality of her call. The world Mary faced was filled with pain and suffering and injustice. She knew that the road to which God would call her son would not be easy and without struggle. Yet Mary grasped the larger purpose to which God was calling her. Putting personal comfort aside, she willingly and courageously agreed to submit to God's plan, for she had experienced God in a larger, more expanded way. The magnifying glass of God's love had revealed a whole new world to which God was calling her.

The late Senator Paul Tsongas, at one point a candidate for President of the United States, underwent grueling cancer treatments, one of which involved coring a sample from the marrow by boring directly into the bone without anesthesia. When asked how he could stand it, he said he used the time of great pain to reflect on the greater pain of others, the victims of torture, and the victims of suffering in the third world.

To what is God calling us? We heard this morning about the great need in the country of Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, where the life expectancy of a Haitian man is 55 years of age. Haitian women are 60 times more at risk of dying in childbirth than women in the United States, and 3 out of every 50 babies born in Haiti do not live long enough to take their first step.⁽¹⁾ For those of us who are expectant parents and grandparents, the magnifying glass makes it pretty clear, doesn't it?

In the face of violence and aggression, the prophet Micah talks about peace. The peace he talks about is not an empty promise, nor it is simply the absence of war. Micah foretells a day when a righteous person shall stand up like a shepherd and feed his flock, not only with physical substances, but with the word of the Lord, true and lasting nourishment, and no one will be

afraid anymore. Christians see Micah's prophecy as a reference to Jesus, but Jesus was not the only person chosen by God to bring peace to the nations. We, too, are chosen, called to follow in his steps.

Some of us are old enough to remember the "war on poverty," launched several years ago in a burst of American idealism. Some have cynically said that we declared war on poverty and lost the war! I say we didn't take our job seriously. To those who say that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, I say, "Wrong! Christianity has not been tried!" Not really. Mary gave herself totally to God. Her radical availability makes her a role model, not only for women, but for all Christians, for all time. God sought her out, found her, and turned her world upside down. Mary responded by saying, "Yes" to God, with joy in her heart and a song on her lips. "*My soul magnifies the Lord.*" My purpose is clear; my life is focused. I have seen and experienced God in a deeper and fuller way. I will follow where he leads.

Have you heard the good news? It's so exciting, I have to tell somebody. No, I have to tell everybody. There's a baby coming who is going to change everything! And God has chosen us to help that baby change the world.

Prayer: Dear God, as Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she was chosen, so we believe you come to us, and choose us to do your work in the world today. Help us, like Mary, to hear your call, and to follow where you lead. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Note:

1. Boulton, Elizabeth M. *Reflections on the Lectionary. Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 25., p. 21.