

“WHAT A ROLE MODEL!”

Luke 1:36-38, 46-55

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

I volunteered to help with the Upward Basketball registration and evaluation process last week and went down the street to get some money to make change. As I was coming back into the church, a family was coming out the door. I heard an excited young boy say to his parents, “I’m going to call Grandma when we get home and tell her that I made the team!” How much it means to these children to “make the team,” to be part of a group experience, to feel as if they belong, that they are making a contribution. How much it means to all of us!

I remember like it was yesterday when we would play team sports in gym class. The coach would pick two captains, and they would choose people to be on their teams. Would I be chosen quickly, or left to stand there round after round? The NBA draft picks have been a big deal, especially for Cleveland. Did we get people who will deliver? Only time will tell! Again, it seems like yesterday that Barb and I came to Cleveland Heights to look at this church and to be interviewed by the committee. Will they accept us, or will they look for somebody else, we wondered? This past year with pastoral changes, the call came to Rev. Marshall and Pastor Covault. Will you consider coming to Church of the Saviour? They were asked. And to the committee, do you want these folks to be your pastors? These are not easy questions. People’s futures, the church’s future is at stake.

It must have been quite an experience for Mary to be visited by Gabriel and to be told that she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world. We know that she never forgot a detail of the story, for she repeated it word for word to the Gospel writer, for after all, she was the only one in the room when the angel came to town. She must have had a shocked look on her face, for after the angel greets her, the first thing he says is “*Do not be afraid, Mary.*” Afraid? I imagine she was petrified, scared to death! Much Christian art shows a pious Mary standing in the corner of a well-manicured room with a halo on her head and a saintly look on her face. A more realistic painting shows Mary grabbing her abdomen. One person in an art museum was heard to exclaim, “She looks as if she is going to puke!” Wouldn’t you, if you received news like that?

A couple weeks ago at the Advent Festival I was convinced, I was actually talked into offering my services to play a half hour of Christmas music on the piano. Now I am not a pianist. I took piano lessons as a boy, and I used to play the piano and organ at a small Baptist church when I was in college, but that was years ago, and the truth is, I have not stayed in practice. But anything for the Homeless Stand-down, I reasoned. If a homeless person will get a

new pair of shoes or boots this winter, as the result of our Silent Auction, I was willing to play. So the bidding started. Soon it was in the hundreds of dollars. Finally, two people agreed that they would stop bidding and I would play a half hour for each of them for \$ 500 a piece. Now the pressure was on! At a thousand dollars an hour, several people suggested that I quit my day job! I was nervous. I was scared. Would the folks think they got their money's worth? If I was nervous about a little piano performance, what must Mary have felt like when not two loving parishioners wanted her to play the piano, but a perfect stranger appeared out of nowhere to tell her she was going to be the mother of the Son of God?

Mary responds to the angel with a question: How can this be? This is impossible! I am not married. I have not had sexual relations with Joseph or with anybody else. I was paying attention in health class. I know how this works. There's no way I am going to have a baby!

Is Mary's questioning any different from ours? When we hear the Gospel story promising peace on earth, goodwill to all, aren't we prone to the same resistance? The conflict in the Middle East has been going on since Jacob and Esau. What is this talk about peace? Good news for the poor almost always means bad news for the rich, and those in charge are not going to relinquish their power and control willingly or easily. How can this be? We are promised a better world, but greed and selfishness, disease and discord are running rampant in our society today, and for all our efforts, there will be a few folks with shoes this winter in Cleveland because of my piano playing, but poverty will still remain epidemic with the people we are trying to help in the city that we love.

Those of us who have live in a scientific and educated community should not get caught up in the why's and wherefore's this morning. We are not talking about the physical probability of a virgin birth. We are talking about the spiritual power of Almighty God. Someone has said that the story of Mary is not so much about a virgin birth as it is about the miraculous, life making acts of the Holy Spirit. That needs to be our focus. I love these words of author and preacher Frederick Buechner. Buechner sums it up better than I can in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, where he says, "The world waits. History waits and labors ...for the child to be born. For this is what Gabriel comes to announce, and Mary stands there as still as life in her blue mantel with her hands folded on her lap, and the terrible salutation is caught like a bird's wing in the golden net of the air: 'Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name...' But she knows his name before Gabriel says it, just as we also know his name, because the child who is going to be born is our child as he is her child. He is that which all the world's history and all of our own inner histories have been laboring to bring forth. And it will be no ordinary birth, but a virgin birth, because the birth of righteousness and love in this stern world is always a virgin birth. It is never men or the nations nor all the power and wisdom of men that bring it forth, but always God."(1) Always God.

And so the angel comes to an ordinary person, a peasant girl in the backwaters of a vast empire. And he comes with an extraordinary mission. Some of you may be planning to see the newest "Mission Impossible" movie, starring Tom Cruise. Once again a challenging, seemingly impossible situation is described. "Your mission, should you choose to accept it," is followed by a description of the challenging, death-defying task that the hero is expected to perform.

When the angel came to Mary, Mary has her questions; she is told that **nothing is impossible with God.** (vs. 37) And then she responds in faith. That's why Mary has been lifted up and lauded through the years. That's why there are statues in her honor and institutions bearing her name. It is not because God chose Mary, significant as that may be. It is because

Mary said, “Yes.” Mary responded in faith and was willing to cooperate with God in bringing salvation to the world.

Mary’s willingness to be the mother of our Lord is a great honor for her, but it also involves vast political implications, which she understands, as exhibited by her song of praise, known as “The Magnificat,” Luke 1:46-55, which was part of our Gospel lesson. The coming of Jesus is the beginning of the transformation of the world. Mary’s song of praise must have been a shock to Elizabeth and to everyone who heard it. It bordered on treason and blasphemy and must have left everyone who heard it angry, confused, embarrassed, surprised, curious and frightened.

First of all, here was a simple peasant girl announcing that God had chosen her for great responsibility, honor and blessing. And then what about this prophecy that God would bring down the rich and powerful and lift up the weak and the powerless? The final straw was the youthful confidence that God can be trusted to keep promises! Where did a mere child get the wisdom and the faith to bear witness to God’s trustworthiness so boldly? Perhaps from the same God who dwelt with and spoke through the voice and actions of her son, Jesus.

God’s promises seem no less preposterous today. Turn the values of the world upside down? Rich become weak, poor become strong? I repeat, the angel’s message is just as hard for us to hear as it was for Mary. And we have just as many questions as Mary had. Maybe more.

But the point is: **Mary responded in faith.** She not only agreed to bear the Son of God in her womb, she stayed loyal to the radical message of salvation throughout her life. If we think about Mary and how privileged she was to be chosen to be the mother of Jesus, then we also need to think about the rest of the story. On Good Friday, we see another picture of Mary, standing at the foot of the cross, her heart broken, her son the victim of a cruel and unjust society’s displaced aggression. Just as she was alone in that room when Gabriel came to her, so now she is alone in her grief and pain. Saying “yes” to God brought her not only unbelievable privilege and great joy, but also heavy responsibility and intolerable pain. Yet Mary remained faithful to God, all the days of her life.

So **God chose Mary** to bring Jesus into the world. Out of all the women that were on the face of the earth, **God chose Mary** for the honor and privilege of giving birth to God’s Son. I believe that the choice of Mary was not that God was “playing favorites,” but that God knew that here was someone who could handle not only the joy of motherhood, but also the pain of loss. Here was someone who would remain faithful throughout all the circumstances of life. And so Mary is for all of us, men and women alike, **a role model** of what it means to be faithful to God.

You know, I am still thinking about that little boy who came out of the church saying, “I’m going to call Grandma and tell her I made the team!” The truth is, at Upward Basketball, no one who registers is turned away. Everyone who signs up and goes through the evaluation makes the team. In like manner, God didn’t just call Mary to bring Jesus into the world. **God calls all of us.** God calls you, and God calls me. We are all being asked to bring Jesus to the person next door, the person in the checkout line at the grocery store, the homeless man downtown, the cancer patient in the hospital, the relative we just can’t stand to be around. Like Mary, each of us is favored, because God has decided to use us to accomplish God’s will.

The question is: will we cooperate with God, as Mary did? Can we envision a new world, as Mary did? Will we stay faithful to God, as Mary did, even when the road leads to a cross? Will we trust God, as Mary did, on dark days as well as sunny days, when the going gets rough, when life does its worst to us? Will we stay faithful to the end? Will we be like **our role**

model, Mary, not only in the excitement of the delivery room, but also in the agony at the foot of the cross?

Mary was chosen by God, and so are we. Mary remained faithful. Will we?

Prayer: Gracious God, we give you thanks for Mary, the mother of our Lord. We praise you that in your wisdom you chose this lowly one to bear your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, into the world. You chose to transform history, to put down the proud, to lift up those who were oppressed, and to redeem Israel through this young woman. We thank you for Mary, for her willingness to be used for your purposes in the salvation of the world. Teach us, in our own fumbling discipleship, to take Mary as our role model, to profit from her example, to take heart from her courageous following, and to become your instruments in the redemption of humanity and the salvation of the world. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Note:

1. Buechner, Frederick. *The Magnificent Defeat*. Quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, by Norman Shawchuck and Rueben Job. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003., p. 26.