

Luke 1:26-38

We think of Mary as a meek and mild young woman. She was probably no older than 14, when she stood before the angel of the Lord, contemplated what was about to happen, and said yes. But she was not truly meek and mild, she was intelligent, questioning, deciding whether or not to accept the challenge that was being laid out before her.

Mary was an exceptional female, an exception to the rule of women who are not named in the Bible. She is among the most named women in the New Testament. (Peters, M. Danielle. "Jewish identity of Mary." <https://udayton.edu>. No date. Retrieved May 28, 2023). Being a woman, especially a young woman, in the days of Jesus meant that she was not very important in the society in which she lived, and where she and her Jewish parents, Joachim and Anna, lived meant that she was a subject of imperial Rome. She was also governed by the Torah law with all its rules and regulations. Mary would have heard the messages of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, where she would have learned about the angel Gabriel. Gabriel is an archangel, one of the two named angels in the Bible, the other being Michael. Just as a side note, did you ever wonder what the name Gabriel means? We learned in our Advent study that "el" means of God, so Gabri-el means mighty one of God. Anyway, when Mary was confronted by Gabriel, she was aware of his identity as a messenger of God.

Even though Mary was of an age that we consider to be very young she was old enough to be married, and as we know, was already engaged to Joseph. Engagements were a binding contract and the only way to end an engagement was to be divorced. Mary's faith was strong as she accepted what she knew would have put her life in jeopardy; the consequence of an unwed pregnancy was to be stoned to death. But Mary knew that God would not allow the one who carried the Son of God to be harmed. Gabriel told her, "You will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). Mary accepted the challenge that was laid before her, knowing it would not be easy, but that God would be with her and with God all things are possible.

Another revelation was given to her at that time, one that was meant as proof of the angel's claim. She was told that her cousin Elizabeth who lived in the hill country was in the 6th month of her pregnancy. A woman who was beyond childbearing age, one who never had a child, was miraculously with child. Mary made the journey to see her cousin and found that not only was Elizabeth expecting, but if we read a few verses further in the 1st chapter of Luke, we discover that Mary "entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" as an affirmation that Mary had made the right choice when she accepted the challenge laid before her to bring the Messiah, the hope of God's people, to live on earth.

I'm sure you've had challenges in life, nothing as important to the world as the decision Mary was faced with, but challenges for your life nonetheless. When you were young you were faced with the challenge of school and all that entails. Then came the challenge of college, or if you chose a different life path, the challenge of marriage, or not. Which of course means finding employment. So many challenges and questions entailed: Is it the right career choice? Can I work with these co-workers? How can I make more money? Of course, finding a place to live was also challenging. Then there are the challenges of raising a family, or not having children and being faced with all those questions. The worry brought about by both situations. Then, after many years of working, is it time to retire? Will we have enough money to live on? What will occupy my time?

Life is a series of challenges and goals. When we don't "make the grade", we don't do well in our educational choice, our marriage fails, our children don't follow the path we would have wanted for them... when something we don't expect to happen happens, we learn to accept it, learn from it, and move on to life's next challenge. As Christ followers we meet all these challenges with the sense of hope that God is with us, no matter what happens we will be able to survive. We may become confused or concerned about what seems to be God's inability to help us out of a situation, or when our prayers aren't answered in the way we expected. However we know that God's ways are not our ways, and we have the hope that God is working for the good of those who believe. And we remember Mary.

Mary was not put into a situation where she was applauded for her decision to accept God's work. The angel tells her what is to be and then departs. The rest of the story follows, but Mary's first response is, as the Rev. Leonard Sweet says, "that of utter openness and trust, the acceptance of God's will and the willingness to be open to God's acceptance. Humility and obedience, acceptance and love mark the very beginning of Jesus' human journey."

Our challenges may seem to us to be far greater than any other person we know. It may seem as though some people walk in a field of roses; when they attempt something it seems as though nothing can go wrong for them. But roses have thorns as well and we need to remember first of all not to compare ourselves to another person, and second that we don't always see the challenges another person may be facing, or the attitude with which they face them.

There is a story about two young brothers who were caught stealing sheep. The punishment back then was to brand the thief's forehead with the letters ST which stood for sheep thief. As a result of this, one brother left the village and spent his remaining years wandering from place to place indelibly marked by disgrace. The other remained in the village, made restitution for the stolen sheep, and became a caring friend and neighbor to the townspeople. He lived out his life in the village an old man loved by all. One day a stranger came to town and inquired about the ST on the old man's forehead. "It happened so long ago I'm not sure what it means," another told him, "but I think the letters must stand for saint."

Just like these two brothers, we have a choice. We can accept the challenges that life gives us with the sense of shame, doom, and gloom, or we can live with the knowledge that God is with us and will see us through anything, forgiving the mistakes we make along the way, and drawing us closer to God and other people. We can refuse to do what God asks of us, or we can accept the challenge to promote the kingdom of God, remembering the questioning, pondering ways of Mary. God used a young, inexperienced woman to deliver the One who would make an indelible impact on the entire world. Her humble obedience and acceptance have been an example for all Christians to follow, knowing that in God, the challenges that are always before us can be used to build God's kingdom.

As Paul said in this morning's reading from his letter to the Romans, "So to the One who is able to strengthen you to live consistently with my good news and the preaching of Jesus, the Anointed, with the revelation of the ancient mystery that has been kept secret since the earliest days, this mystery is revealed through the prophetic voices passed down in the Scriptures, as they have been commanded by the Eternal God. In this time, this mystery is being made known to the nations so that all may be led to faith-filled obedience. To the one true and wise God, we offer glory for all times through Jesus, the Anointed One. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, The Voice)

All glory be to God