

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

Today's gospel reading takes us to the time shortly after the angel had visited Mary and the Holy Spirit had descended upon her. One of the messages that was given to her was that her cousin, in her old age, would bear a child. Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country, and found not only was she expecting a child, but the child recognized that Mary was with child, and not just any child, but a Messiah! This was when Mary recognized and accepted that she truly was carrying the Son of God. And as her foremothers before her, she broke out in song, what we recognize and celebrate as the Magnificat.

I could explore all kinds of amazing theological pathways from this scripture, however, I have decided to share with you what the author of the book we have been using for our Advent study has to say about Mary because he expands upon her thoughts and decisions to guide us in our faith journey. In his book *Hidden Christmas* Timothy Keller discusses how Mary thoughtfully questioned and responded to the angel Gabriel.

In Chapter 5 Keller discusses how the angel came to Mary, asking her to bring the promise of God to fruition. Mary answered yes, after she asked some practical questions. Keller also discusses today's gospel text, and how we are to respond to our gift of Jesus.

The author holds Mary up as a model of Christian faith. Mary questions reflectively and rationally; she doesn't have blind faith. She wants to know *how* what the angel is saying to her can possibly be true, how can a virgin have a child? Through her doubts and questions, she came to a faithful affirmative response. This doubt is different from Zechariah's expression of doubt when he encountered the angel; he doubted with a closed mind. Keller wrote that when we doubt with a closed mind we are trying to stay in control, not even considering what is being proposed. He holds Mary's doubt up as one with an open mind who isn't going to dismiss a proposal simply because it will change the way things are done. He asks, "What kind of doubt do you have?"

Keller then moves on to how Mary's faith grew in stages. He said there are people who have a very long time coming to faith, people who immediately accept faith, and those like Mary whose faith grows at a middle speed demonstrating that faith and acceptance come at different speeds to different people.

Mary's first response was *measured incredulity*. She asked a reasonable question, wondering how on earth what the angel had told her could be possible. She doesn't stop the conversation; she asks for more information. Can you think of a time when you responded to someone's new idea with a response that absolutely stopped any chance of a discussion? I know I am guilty of this, sometimes because I didn't want to take the time to listen to what was being said, sometimes because I thought I knew what the person was going to say before they said it, and sometimes because I didn't want to hear because it would cause me to have to consider changing something I was comfortable with. Have you ever, like me, thought you were so right that you wouldn't allow discussion of other possibilities? What God inspired ideas might we have missed because of our own stubbornness, our own need to stay in control?

Mary's second stage is *simple acceptance*. Keller says, without explanation, that Mary had been raised in a culture that did not believe that God could become human. We talked about this in Bible study on Thursday. What we surmised is that the Roman

culture surrounded the Jewish people, and the Roman beliefs were that the emperor considered himself to be a god, and the Romans also believed that their pagan gods would masquerade as humans on occasion. Perhaps the rejection of pagan gods is why God becoming human was thought to be impossible. Once Mary had an explanation of how the impossible could be possible, she didn't exactly understand, but she acknowledged the possibility, and agreed to go along with God's plan as presented to her by the angel. Mary didn't need to have every detail laid out before she accepted, she accepted on faith. Some people can't do that, they need to know there is a plan in place for every step of the way and it must make absolute sense to them before they agree to move ahead. But sometimes the only way to move forward is to act on the situation like Mary did, and just do it, trusting that God will take care of the details.

Keller tells us that eventually Mary comes to *exercising faith from the heart*. The angel told Mary that her cousin was expecting a child in her old age, another miracle baby is waiting to be born. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, and Elizabeth cries out with joy that the mother of her Lord has come to visit her. Elizabeth immediately recognizes that Mary is expecting the holy child. Elizabeth is one who would understand the miracle Mary is experiencing. It is with Elizabeth's affirmation that Mary begins to understand that it is all true, the promises of God are going to come to fruition through her, through the child she will bear. It has taken some time, but Mary now has gone beyond simple obedience to joyfully giving her heart. She has allowed God to work in her and God will do great things through her.

So how can we follow in Mary's footsteps? By realizing that if we commit ourselves to God, we can trust that God is committed to us. This doesn't guarantee nothing will go wrong in our lives because it will. However those troubles are what refine us, they are what makes our faith stronger. Mary knew if she agreed to follow God's plan her life would become far more difficult than what it already was. To quote Keller, "but because she humbled herself and became a servant, she become one of the great people in history." Which makes me think of Mother Theresa, one of the most well known women of this century, not because of her influential wealth but because of how she cared for the untouchables of the earth.

In surrendering to God, in allowing God to work through you, amazing things can take place. Surrendering to God's will isn't done to receive what God will give you, it is for you to do because you love God for what he did for you through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mary surrendered before she had the knowledge of the gift that came to humanity through Jesus. Mary accepted even though by doing so she would suffer shame and would be risking her life. But stop and remember, Jesus knew he was going to lose everything and he still said yes to God. Only because of that can we surrender our lives fully to God; if God was willing to do all this for us, we can trust God to watch over us when we follow God's will.

Once Mary fully understood her mission in life she embraced it and proclaimed the good news we hear in the Magnificat. And that proclamation is still valid today. God has fulfilled the promise that was made to the line of King David, a new king reigns. One who fills the hungry with the best food and shows love and mercy to those who follow him. Mary points the way to Jesus, and we follow. All glory be to God.