

Mary's Call

From our Christian point of view, seemingly everything about Christmas has to do with Jesus. The word Christmas itself has Christ as its root. Christmas is all about God taking human form and being born among us, born as one of us. This remarkable event is earth-shattering and history-shattering in its implications for people of faith. For what begins with a birth in an out of the way place, out of public view, will end with what seems like a most public death on a cross, witnessed by hundreds, before the narrative ultimately ends with that empty cross on Easter Sunday. Yes, Christmas is all about Jesus. As for you and me, as fellow Christians, we don't ever have to ever worry about keeping Christ in Christmas. For how can it be Christmas for us without Christ?

In these weeks leading up to Christmas, Jesus is also at the heart of our preparations. But rather than jumping the gun and rush to kneel at the manger, now is that time when we stand back a bit and look at the larger story.

In the Advent traditions of the church, the third Sunday of Advent—today—is the day that we take a closer look at Mary, the mother of Jesus. That's why the pink candle in our Advent wreath was lit as we began our service today. Mary is a central figure in the story of Jesus for very obvious reasons. To be human is to be born of a human mother. Jesus as God incarnate—God in human flesh—means that he, just like you and just like me, had a mother. And that of course is Mary.

Now we Protestant Christians can sometimes get all tripped up when we're talking about Mary. Part of the reason for that is in response to or reaction against the hugely elevated role that Mary occupies in both the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Orthodox Church in the east. Over the centuries in which Christian theology and doctrine took shape after the first century of the church, theologians developed elaborate theological assertions about Mary because of her role in giving birth to no less than the Son of God. By the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, many of the Reformers felt that the assertions about Mary and her place in the grand scheme of things had gone beyond any biblical basis for those assertions.

So as the Protestant tradition took hold, the focus on Mary for some was scaled back so much—to the point that she is simply one of the numerous pieces in the nativity scenes that we unpack and display for a few weeks each year, only to be packed away for another year when all the other Christmas decorations come down. While Mary does appear a few more times in the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, most notably at the foot of the cross at Jesus' crucifixion, she doesn't play much of a public role once Jesus is born and raised.

For many of us then, on this third Sunday of Advent when we hear Mary's story and focus on her, we're given the opportunity to ponder anew these events and consider their larger implications for us as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas.

One the one hand, when we look at Mary as she is approached by the angel Gabriel, who addresses her as "favored one" or "blessed one," we can conclude that she has been identified by God as an extraordinary young woman who is uniquely equipped to be the bearer of the son of God. We can find ourselves standing back in awe and wonder that as she accepted this call by God, she does so with grace and poise. She takes on an almost superhuman character that she was up to this amazing task.

From this perspective we may be inspired more by her uncommonness, her uniqueness. She alone was not only willing, but also able to do what was asked of her by God.

In many ways it is no wonder then that we can place her on a pedestal and find her worthy of awe and wonder and admiration, and maybe, just maybe worship.

While this way of looking at and understanding Mary has power and meaning to it, there is another way to view this event that I believe has meaning and implications for us today—especially as we continue our focus on God’s call, as we have been this fall.

Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby reminds us that John Calvin, the Protestant reformer who paved the way for what became the Presbyterian church, has a different take on the role that Mary plays in the biblical narrative. She writes, “. . . Calvin rejects the idea that Gabriel’s identification of Mary as ‘favored’ suggest she is ‘worthy of praise.’ Rather, Gabriel recognizes Mary as the ‘*happy one*’ who has received ‘the undeserved love of God,’ who alone is to be adored.” (quoting John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 33; in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., © 2008 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 94)

It is in this view of Mary, that she is as ordinary as you and I are ordinary. I mean no offense by that to either any of you or Mary. What I mean by this is to make the point that Mary is every bit as human in the fullest sense of the word as you and I are human.

Mary was a young woman who lived in a rather obscure place. Nazareth in her day was a city not worthy of any special note. It was a place where simple people lived. They were born there. They were raised there. They worked there. And they died there. In some ways we could say that Nazareth was just another town on the map. It was Anytown.

Why then did the angel Gabriel come to that particular place and to that particular young woman? Was there something uniquely special about Mary that would have led Gabriel to issue God’s call to her?

What we know about Mary is pretty limited. We know that she was a virgin who had never married. We know that she was betrothed to be married to a man named Joseph. We know that she and Joseph were honorable people of faith who sought to live in accordance with God’s law.

In many ways, Mary was as typical as they come when it comes to her ordinariness. She was simply a young woman who was seeking to find her way in life and seemingly had taken a big step in her life in her betrothal to a another within her faith tradition.

That God called such an ordinary woman is both comforting and it is awesome. It is comforting in that it is a powerful reminder that the sovereign God of the cosmos, creator of everything, is interested in and attentive to such ordinary people as Mary of Nazareth. It is yet another example of how personal our God can be. If God can and does act in the life of someone like Mary, God can and does act in the life of people just like me—including me. Gabriel, the angel of God, comes directly to Mary. He doesn’t speak through others in more elevated structures of the Jewish hierarchy. He doesn’t call Mary to the temple in Jerusalem to issue the call. No. He shows up unannounced and speaks directly to her in a very personal way.

It’s a reminder to us in our day that God can show up at any time at any place and to anyone. Are you listening for that voice calling out to you?

That God called such an ordinary woman like Mary is also awesome for us to behold. Gabriel, the angel tries to give Mary an inkling of just how special this baby she is to bear will be. "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." (Lk. 1:32-33)

While this recitation by the angel makes for wonderful poetic drama and imagery, it's hard to imagine how such a declaration would actually be received by anyone unexpectedly encountering an angel. The gospel writer is recalling this story of Mary's encounter with the angel after the fact. It's committed to writing knowing that Mary did accept the call that was presented to her. She did become pregnant. She did bear a son who she named Jesus. He did grow up to become everything that the angel had promised, and more.

We could speculate that Mary is included in the gospel account because she is the one who said yes to God's call. Could it be that others were visited by Gabriel who declined the call? Could it be that there were many others who said no before Mary finally said yes?

The fact remains that it is Mary who responds affirmatively to God and in so doing her life is profoundly changed.

My friends, the Advent season leading up to Christmas is an ideal time to ponder anew not just the meaning of the Christmas season that is coming just a week from now, but a time to listen to God through the story.

Mary's story that began with Mary's call is a powerful reminder that God calls each of us into the story of God's love for the world shown us in the story that is at the heart of Christmas.

So our call in this Advent season continues to be to wait, to anticipate and to prepare. For it is now just a week away that we will be gathering here—once in the morning to light that 4th candle in our Advent wreaths when we'll take a closer look at Joseph, the one to whom Mary was betrothed. And then a week from this evening, we'll gather on Christmas Eve when we ponder even more so the wonder of the birth that resulted from Mary's call.

As Christians we will forever be grateful that Mary accepted the call that was issued her by God. May we be so inspired to be open and attentive to God who is calling each of us to follow in that way.