

WORSHIP

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Fruits of the Spirit: Faithfulness

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Galatians 5:1-2, 16, 22-25

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and 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.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

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We're in the midst of a sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit – these are the nine virtues that the apostle Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians that are the outward signs of what it looks like when we follow Christ in our lives. Each Sunday we are pairing one fruit with a story from Scripture that offers an illustration of what that virtue looks like when it is lived. Today our fruit of the spirit is faithfulness and the illustration is this very familiar story from Luke's gospel about Mary. Listen with me for the word of the Lord...

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I thought I would start this sermon with an interactive exercise.

I want you to raise your hand if you are ever, or have ever been, intimidated by the Bible. That's what I thought.

My guess is that we all have different reasons for being intimidated.

I bet some of us don't feel like we know the Bible well enough. You might be the person who gets kind of clammy when someone asks you about a story from the Bible – thinking that you should know it, but drawing a blank.

Others, I would imagine, are intimidated by the history. It's hard to keep it all straight. All those names. Those connections. Those genealogies.

It would natural to be intimidated by the fact that this book is God's word; that it tells the holy story of God and God's people.

Some are probably intimidated by how many smart people throughout the ages have already had important things to say – and important things to share – about what the Bible means. In light of all those things all those smart people have already said, what is left for us to talk about right?

But this morning I wonder how many of us are intimidated by the characters in the Bible. How *they* lived. How *deeply* they believed. How much they *trusted*. How incredibly **faithful** they were.

Abraham and Sarah left their home and their livelihood.

Moses delivered the message to Pharaoh.

David faced Goliath.

Daniel spent the night the lion's den.

The disciples dropped their nets and followed.

Sure, the people in the Bible weren't perfect. Far from it. But so many of them were *faithful*. And what is our life – what is our faith – in comparison to them?

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This morning we heard that story about Mary's faithfulness.

This is usually a passage we hear sometime in mid-December, in the midst of the holiday vortex about two weeks from Christmas.

But we all know that just doesn't work, biologically. The angel Gabriel didn't visit Mary within sight of the manger with the cattle already lowing and the star overhead. No, when the angel Gabriel showed up, it was out the clear blue sky.



When I heard this story, I can't help thinking about Christmas pageants. Mary's voice is forever type-cast by the various elementary school girls who I've known that have played the part: "here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

When we re-tell the story, we make it sound so simple: Gabriel comes, Mary says yes, Jesus is born.

In some respects, our Christmas pageants aren't all that far off. Mary was young – not elementary school aged, but around 13 or 14 years old. With life expectancy around 40 in that time, young women were married at about the age that a young woman in our time would start taking geometry; about the time the young women in our church go to their first Montreat Youth Conference.

And Mary did say yes. She answered the call that God placed upon her life – a calling that would define her, forever. Which may be part of what is intimidating to us as we consider Mary as an example of what it is to be faithful.

In our minds, however, we've got Mary trapped in a stained glass window. The writer Debie Thomas says that part of the problem is that we've got Mary buried under so many layers of theology, history, and church politics that it is nearly impossible to excavate her. Some Christians pray to her. Others ignore her on principal. Some people say she represents a troubling model of pious femininity. Others celebrate her as the "Theotokos," the Mother of God.

"Would the real Mary please stand up," Thomas writes.

"Because [we've] got so many questions. Like:

When did you tell your parents you were pregnant?

Did you tell Joseph yourself, or did the gossipmongers of Nazareth take care of that for you?

Did anyone in the village believe your story?

After Gabriel departed, did you doubt his visitation?

Did you question your sanity?

Fear for your life?"

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Here, in the slow still of the summer, removed from the frenetic pace of Christmas and all that comes with it, I notice three things in this familiar story about Mary and her visit from the angel that make her example of faithfulness more approachable – more human – less intimidating.



In my study of the text, I notice there are three gaps in the story – three distinct places – between the time Gabriel arrives on the scene and when Mary wraps the child in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger – I notice there are three spaces that make Mary’s “yes” more of an example that we can follow, rather than an impossible ideal that we admire.

The first space is between Gabriel’s title for Mary (‘Favored one’) and the task he assigns to her (to bear the Christ child – the ‘Son of the Most High’). The Bible says that after Mary heard that she was favored, she was “much perplexed.” Ya think?? The Scripture doesn’t give us a picture about what was going through Mary’s mind.

I wonder if she felt adequate.

I wonder if she had a sudden rush of regret – thinking about all the things she had done or thought that would disqualify her from being the ‘favored one.’

And I wonder if she considered what exactly being a ‘favored one’ really meant – because what Gabriel ended up promising wasn’t an easy life with wealth and health and comfort.

I appreciate the fact that Mary was perplexed. How could she not be?

The second space lies between Mary’s question (‘how can this be?’) and her eventual consent (‘let it be with me according to your word.’). There’s a great painting by the artist Sandro Botticelli that depicts Gabriel visiting Mary. Botticelli paints Gabriel in the middle of the frame, kneeling, delivering the news. Mary is pressed far against the right side of the frame – not quite recoiling, but definitely moving away. Behind them is an open door – where the rest of the world...unburdened by this divine request...beckons.

I love that painting and the delay in Mary’s response because it gives me a window into her humanity. Again, Debie Thomas writes, “for better or for worse, I can’t relate to someone who jumps headlong into obedience. I can, however, relate to the one who struggles, to the one whose ‘yes’ is cautious and ambivalent.”

The third space opens up after the end of today’s reading – after Gabriel ‘departs from her.’ This is a gap with which I am very familiar. It’s the moment when the prayer ends – that feeling of being spiritually connected wavers – when I come down from the mountaintop and realize that the work of faith is to walk through the valley. I wonder what it would have been like for Gabriel to stick around – to corroborate Mary’s story. Erase her doubts and silence her critics. But that’s not how faithfulness works. It’s more of a journey than that.

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Mary said yes.

She was faithful.



She was obedient.

She is to be admired.

And – like every other biblical character we put up on a pedestal because we meet them in the sacred pages of Scripture – we also have to remember that Mary was a real person. That, while coming of age in a different time, she grappled with the same questions and reservations and insecurities as we do.

What people like Mary help me realize is that root of faithfulness isn't found in heroic acts – like bearing and the mothering the Son of the Most High, or (in Moses' case) leading God's people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, or (in the disciples' case) spreading the news of Christ's resurrection in the face of persecution. No, the root of faithfulness is found in believing – and accepting – and trusting – that God can use you for some larger purpose.

So let me ask you, once again, to humor me with an interactive exercise: raise your hand if you believe that God is still active in the world – in fact, active enough in the world, that in the midst of 7 billion people, God can act through you.

Walter Brueggemann – this past year's Willard Lecturer – recently said that in his experience, very few of the people who make up the body of believers we call the church really imagine God to be an active character in the story of our lives.

It's not that we don't believe in God. It's just that we imagine God to be passive – in the background – observing things – watching – encouraging. And maybe that's a defense mechanism – helping us avoid the difficult questions about those things that happen that don't make any sense. That's easier – to think that the pieces are in motion and we're just here, biding our time.

But that's the picture of God that we get Scripture. Because this is a story about a God who is *involved* – a God who *does* things – great and small. A God who is constantly at *work*. A God who regularly uses people to point out and tell about that work.

I don't know the numbers, but I suspect that many of us confuse faith and faithfulness with knowing something, or being certain about matters of belief, or accomplishing some heroic act.

What if, instead, we defined faithfulness – not as something we possess, not as a list of things we have to believe, not as a resume builder for the ultimate analysis – but as an invitation we accept...to be a part of something that God is doing in the world...choosing to do through us...because we are favored...and loved.

That's why Mary was faithful.

Even though she had questions – even though she was perplexed – she was faithful enough to imagine that God might be at work – and that God might use her.



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There are a lot of places where I need to see God at work.

In my life.

The lives of those I love.

In our city.

Our country.

Our world.

Sometimes I am overwhelmed by the need.

The brokenness.

Could it be that a first step toward that healing isn't waiting on someone else to fix it –
or for it to resolve itself –

but that the first step is saying 'yes,'

let it be with me?

Let us pray: PRAYER

