

Mary's Story: The Need for Love

Luke 1:26-38; John 15:9-17

On this 4th Sunday of Advent, we'll think about love. So, I want you to consider this: **Your deepest human need is to experience how wide, long high and deep the love of God is for you – and then to respond to that love by loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and loving your neighbor as yourself.**

Our series is called, “Siri, why do we need the manger?” Week by week, we have joined Christians in many parts of the world to ask whether Jesus was born to meet the deepest needs of our hearts. Week 1: hope. Week 2: peace. Week 3: joy. And this week, I contend, we come to our deepest need of all, i.e., love. To guide us through the matter of our need for love, we look at the much-loved story of Mary reported by Luke in 1:26-38.

To start, I want you to **consider carefully one word** that is found both in the account of Elizabeth, who was to have her first child in her old age (cf, v. 25) and then twice in the story about Mary (cf., v. 28 & v. 30). That word is **favor**. It's a word that mean **an intentional act of bestowing love and grace upon a person in ways that will bring them benefit and blessing**. It's an active word. When God is said to have favor on someone, it almost always means that something miraculous and wonderful will happen.

Long before Elizabeth and Mary lived, women like Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah and Hannah had experienced God's loving favor as he enabled them to have a child after years of waiting. Those were significant women in Israel's history. Centuries later, Elizabeth found herself favored by God just like those women were, i.e., by God giving her a child in her old age to take away the disgrace she had felt from her people.

But Mary was different, wasn't she? Mary's favor would be the greatest gift of God's loving favor in the history of children being born. But Mary's was not to be a birth after years of barrenness, a birth that would remove disgrace. Oh, no! Not at all. Hers was most certainly to be a gift showing God's favor. We celebrate it here today. But, when she first heard about God's favor, she surely didn't think it sounded very loving.

What Kind of Love Is This? *“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

One day, the angel Gabriel appears to this young engaged woman who was probably between 12-16 years old. The name Gabriel means “hero or champion of God” so you know he is an imposing presence. Gabriel's words to Mary were incredibly positive, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with

you!” But, Mary was shocked. What would you do if a powerful and supernatural being popped out in front of you? I think v. 29 might be an understatement, “*Mary was greatly perplexed and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*” I think I might have let out a big scream! What about you?

But, Gabriel quickly says, “Don’t be afraid. God knows you and is ready to show favor to you.” Then, Gabriel reveals how God’s favor will play out in her life. “Mary, you’re going to conceive and give birth to a child. When he is born, name him Jesus. Your boy will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...”

As Gabriel goes on speaking about Jesus, I imagine Mary listening, nodding, taking it in.... But, then, what the angel has said comes home to her! “Wait a minute! Did you say I’m going get pregnant? Like, right now? I’m not married yet. I may be a teenager, but I know how babies are made and I have done any of that yet!! Gabriel, *how will this be? I am a virgin(1:34)!*”

Remember that Mary was a real teenage girl. So, I want you to put yourself, as much as you possibly can, into her shoes. As a teenage, engaged woman, what would you think if you discovered that you will become pregnant outside of marriage?

Let me tell you one more thing about Mary? The research done about her hometown Nazareth at that time indicates that she and Joseph were a part of a very small and very conservative group of Jewish people. Her upbringing would have been like us growing up in a family very critical of contemporary culture, of going to movies, of trusting public schools, of public media... These families had lived lives very separated from the world. Think of Mary going back to her community to tell them, “Guess what? An angel just told me that I’ll be pregnant --, but it’s OK. I’m still a virgin!”

I’ll tell you, had I been Mary, I would have asked more than just, “How will this be?” I would have asked, “Gabriel, are you going to be the one who tells my Mom and Dad? And, what about Joseph? Will you show up in our synagogue to tell our friends? Because this will bring shame on our entire family, you know. Could we wait just a year until I’m married? I mean, do I have a choice in any part of all this?”

Do you see the point? Childlessness for Elizabeth meant shame. Her pregnancy would mean the end of her shame. But, the opposite was true for Mary. For Mary, a pregnancy like this would bring her shame. This pregnancy threatened her marriage, her relationship to her family and her future.

Gabriel's answer to her question is that God's Spirit would come on her and God's power would envelope her. "That's how it will be, Mary." And, Mary is left with a decision: Will she trust God?

The Faith of Mary – *I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled* (1:38).

As I read Luke 1, I find the journey between Mary's question in v. 34, i.e., "how will this be?" to her commitment in v. 38, "May it be to me..." to be remarkable. For Mary, that step of trusting God happens quickly. For me, it's usually slower. But what happened to her is so much like the way I experience God's leading in my life. Things happen that are hard – like an untimely death or a rejection letter, etc. – and I have questions about what God is doing. Mary's testimony shows me that God wants us to bring our genuine questions to him. In any authentic, healthy relationship, we find we can voice our questions. And Mary shows us that this opportunity to voice the questions we have to the One we love is something God wants us to do.

Now -- You probably have noticed that Mary asked Gabriel a question much like the old priest Zechariah asked in 1:18, "How can I be sure my old wife will have a baby?" But, as you know, there are different ways to ask questions. My child might ask me on a Monday morning, "What are you doing today, Dad?" – and honestly care about how busy I will be. But he might ask on Saturday, "What are you doing today, Dad?" – and hope I'll be away so that he can have a wild party at the house. Same question – different meaning.

So, when God called two different people, one didn't believe and the other did. What made the difference between the way Zechariah received God's message and the way Mary received it? Wouldn't you have expected that the priest would have believed? He had faithfully studied God's Word and served God for decades. And, he was in the Temple because of God's blessing to him. And, remember, the news the angels told him was fantastic news. It was an answer to years of his prayers. Of all people in the world, you would think Zechariah would be the kind to receive a message from God -- and to believe it!

On the other hand, Mary would have been the least likely to do so. She was a teenager who had grown up in the rough town of Nazareth. She was a poor young woman from the least respected part of the country. And, the news she receives is almost the worst imaginable thing she could hear. For me, one of the many startling things about the Christmas story is that Mary is the one who believes, and Zechariah is the one who does not.

So, I have asked myself: Which one do I seem more to be like – Zechariah or Mary? I've followed Jesus 60 years and have sought to do so faithfully. I've had

the privilege of studying the Word at Bible school, Christian college, and theological seminary. I've been a pastor for most of my life. I have even had the incredible privilege of preaching on Christmas Sunday at the historic Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena. Am I more like Zechariah or Mary? If someone told you that there is a person at LAC who had been visited by an angel and then believed the God's message, would you guess it was Pastor Greg or one of our middle school girls? I'll tell you – as I read this story, I've prayed, "Lord, when you speak to me, I want to believe and obey!"

I think many of us in church today are probably a bit like Zechariah. You see, it's possible for us to walk with God so long that we settle in to our religious habits. We do what Christians do – go to church, Bible study, small group. We live life feeling that we know what God does and doesn't do; can and cannot do. It would be easy for us, like Zechariah, to think, "God doesn't give birth to really old parents! God can't bring a child into this world through a virgin woman!" It's easy to go through our religious lives without realizing a miracle working God is present and at work in this world. Sometimes, I imagine we would prefer God to be comfortable, predictable – safe. He is none of those!

Zechariah would have to learn that God is still at work in this world and that God does the impossible. He would have to be silent for a while so that he might learn that God does more than we could ever imagine.

Jesus frequently commended the faith of children who are able to receive the kingdom of God in simple trust. He said we have to be like children in that way. And, Mary shows us what that looks like.

So, Gabriel briefly answers her one question. Then, he says, "*No word from God will ever fail* (1:37)." He was thereby saying, "This all seems impossible to you, Mary. But, with God, nothing is impossible." This was all Mary needed to hear. Although God's call on her life would seem hard, in faith she says, "May it be to me as God has said." And with those words, everything we celebrate at Christmas would come to the world.

Jesus and Our Need for Love -- *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love* (Jn 15:9).

As we have done each week this Advent season, we now turn to the end of Jesus's life, to his farewell words to his disciples found in John 13-16. Remember what I said about God's favor, i.e., God's favor is shown through intentional acts of bestowing love and grace upon people in ways that meet our deepest needs. That's true whether you are an old priest or a young teenager.

So, at the end of his life, in John 15, Jesus told his followers that he chose them (as God chose Mary) and loved them. He said this just before he would go to the cross and leave these disciples facing challenges that were enormous, some almost as challenging as Mary was called to face in her obedience to God.

So, Jesus said, remember that I love you and what I do is out of love for you. Then he said, “Remain in my love.” That means, what I am doing may not feel very loving in difficult times – but someday you will see that what I am doing, I am doing out of love for you. My upcoming death is for you. Trust me. Remain in me.”

In his words, **Jesus describes the love that we need.** He says, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. And, you are my friends... (15:13-14a).*” So, the evidence of real love is first, that the one who loves is willing to make huge personal sacrifices to meet the needs of the one being love. God loves the people of this world. He knows that the deepest need of every human being is to have someone who will cleanse us from whatever is wrong in our past, heal us from what is broken in our lives, save us from our sins, and begin to remake us. And, God knew that the only way for that to happen was for someone to enter this world, live a sinless life as we all are meant to live but then have failed to live. Then, that sinless one would have to be willing to die in the place of those who are far from sinless. Who would do that?

Hear now the Word of God: *Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:7-8).* That kind of love – the kind we most need – is exactly what comes to us through the child born through Mary.

Not only did Jesus tell us what really love is, but **he also tells us how we are to respond to his love. And that response is so much like Mary’s – she entrusted her life to God.** In Jn 14:1-6, Jesus put it so simply, “What I do, I do for you. I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Trust me. Believe in me.” Mary’s life with God was launched with that clear affirmation of trust, “May it be to me as you have said.” Have you ever consciously and intentionally entrusted your life to Jesus? Is your faith in Jesus?

Faith in Jesus changes your life. Think about what happened when Mary trusted God. **Pastor Annie Neufeld says, “For Mary, God’s favor seemed to mean two things. First, it meant that she received God into her life in a new way. And second, it meant that she carried God into the world in a new way.”** Of course, those matters of receiving God and carrying God were both biological and spiritual for her. And, both are real to us too – though in a bit of a different way. When

God calls, you must receive him into your life and then carry him out into the world.

And, that life as carriers of Jesus into this world is what Jesus refers to in John 15 as a life of keeping his commands. The heart of this command, Jesus said twice, is loving others. That life lived in response to the love of Jesus is what we'll begin to consider when the New Year, 2019 begins.

But today, I want to say a few words to you about the fact that living life in response to the loving call of God will sometimes be as challenging as Mary's was. Often, you will find God will ask you to do things that are not natural to you, e.g., to be honest and not cheat on the test that everyone else is cheating on. Or, to run the business in ways that no one else is doing it – even if you know you won't make as much money. Sometimes, when you follow Jesus, your friends, families or colleagues may reject you or abandon you. And, you have to decide if you will do what Jesus said to do, i.e., “remain in his love.” How do you do that?

My wife Chris and I were having lunch recently with Stephanie Eversfield from our church. I have watched her as she has been faced with issues of trusting God and seeking to rest in the love of God in the midst of some very difficult realities. Stephanie used two expressions for what a life of faithful obedience to God often demands. She's also given me permission to pass them on to you:

1. **Radical Acceptance** – This means we do not just accept a part of God's plan as being something to bring about good – but all of it. Mary did not say, “I'll do this if you let me get pregnant after I get married.” No, it's radical acceptance of the fact that God knows what he's doing and that what he's doing is done out of his love for you – and is for your good.
2. **Complete Surrender** – This is Mary saying, “May it be to me as you have said.” Even if I'm the one who has to tell my parents. Even if I lose out on marrying Joseph. Even if I'm excommunicated from all I know. Wherever. Whatever you decide to do, O Lord, count me to be all in.

Do you have any hard decisions – great or small – about obeying God when you know it will be costly to do so? I'm sure both Mary and Stephanie would affirm that the faith-filled acts of radically accepting the plan of God and completely surrendering to the will of God are daily calls upon us. **God's love for us is seen in the good things he provides – but also the challenging things he calls us to.** We see the love of God for Mary in that, sending this boy through her would ultimately be the source of her own salvation – and ours.

So, Siri – why do we need the manger? Because, even though we will face challenges to our faith as we follow him, we will, in his time, find that he will do

more than we ever could imagine. That includes meeting those deepest human needs we have spoken about throughout this Advent Season: 1) hope in the midst of loss, 2) peace in the midst of brokenness, 3) joy in the midst of emptiness, and 4) love through discovering we are known and favored – yes loved -- by God himself.

Yes, it is Jesus who has come, born in a manger, to meet all those needs. Yes, he was the one who showed us the greatest love that can be shown, by laying down his life for us. My favorite poet, Luci Shaw, has tried to help us see the miracle of this child in a manger coming to meet the deepest needs of our lives. Here is some of her poem, picturing Mary looking at her newborn son come to meet her deepest needs:

Mary's Song.

*...Quiet he lies
whose vigor hurled
a universe. He sleeps
whose eyelids have not closed before...
Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught that I might be free,
blind in my womb to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth for me to be new-born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.*

Luci Shaw