

Mary's Story

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, December 27, 2009

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. Gracious God, we do thank you for all of the precious gifts that we receive, but especially we thank you for the gift of our savior; and we thank you for Mary and for Joseph – Mary who bore him into our life and Mary and Joseph as they sought to be good parents in raising Jesus in your ways. And so we pray that as your word becomes flesh in our hearts and in our minds, that this day as you speak to us, we might be strengthened in our walk with you and might be empowered to live as your people sharing the joy of the good news that our savior has come; in Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Sermon:

Mary was a product of her times. She had been carefully raised by her mother in the ways and the duties of a Jewish wife. She knew how to provide for a family because she learned from her mother how to provide for a family's needs; how to cook meals and prepare meals and serve meals; how to provide clothing for the family; how to provide a home that would be a safe place for the family to be. Mary learned all of this while standing at her mother's side and watching her mother care for her and her siblings.

Mary was a product of her time. And being a product of her time, Mary did not choose her spouse. Rather, she had an arranged marriage. Her family in Nazareth was probably a family of pretty good standing. I would imagine that they were a family of deep faith because Mary is a woman of deep faith and you don't just suddenly wake-up to have deep faith; you are taught a deep faith at an early age. But I'd say that they were probably of good standing because Mary was betrothed to Joseph. She was promised in marriage to the son of a carpenter. Joseph probably went into his father's trade – that's what young men did in

those days. He was following in his father's footsteps and just like Mary had been at her mother's side learning how to care and to provide for the needs of a family, Joseph was at his father's side learning the craft and the skills to be a carpenter. A carpenter in those days, just like today, a good carpenter was a good job, it paid fairly well and provided what the family needed to survive on.

And so Joseph was probably in a family that was in very good standing in the community there in Nazareth and here an arrangement had been made between those two families that their children would one day, when they reached the right age, would be given to one another in marriage. And so Mary did not choose her spouse. She did not go out on dates like our young people do these days to find out what would be the right match for me if I am to be married. No, Mary had her marriage arranged for her. And so she was promised in marriage to Joseph at an early age.

Add to all of this, two upstanding families in the community of Nazareth, probably two very faithful families in that community, ones who exhibited the highest ideals of the Jewish faith for the faith community of Nazareth. Add to this the fact that Mary finds out before she is married that she is going to give birth to a son. It is amazing to me each time I read that story of the Annunciation which we missed last Sunday; of Gabriel coming to Mary and telling her what God was about to do in her life, the thoughts that must of raced though her mind – "My family will be disgraced. The one to whom I am promised in marriage will not have me. There is a possibility that because now I am pregnant before I am married that Joseph could ask that I be stoned to death by my faith community; and my faith community could fulfill that because of what is happening to me and what has happened to me." Think of all of the thoughts that may have raced through her mind as Gabriel was sharing this news with her. And then to hear her very simple response, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Mary was a young woman of a great faith, a faith that was beyond her years of experience. It was a faith that enabled her to trust in the word that was coming to her in the angel Gabriel. It was a faith that enabled her to trust in the one

that was beyond Gabriel that she did not see or hear her in that moment; a faith that enabled her to trust that God would make things right. And so Mary instead of saying and pleading, "No, do not let this happen to me; do not let this shame come upon me and my family. Do not do this to my parents and my siblings." Instead of pleading with the angel, and saying no, she said the simple words, "Let it be to me according to your word." And in that one simple act of faith, Mary became the mother of God, the mother of our savior.

It tells us in the scriptures that when Joseph learned about this news, he took the high road. He could of easily brought public disgrace to Mary and her family; he knew that he was not the father of this child. He could of requested that the community stone his betrothed to death, but instead his immediate reaction to the news was to talk quietly with Mary; to quietly put her away; to allow her the dignity and the decency of not having public disgrace brought upon her and her family. And so Joseph – some will say he was saving his own skin and his own reputation, but I don't believe that was the case, I believe rather that he had a love for Mary and for Mary's family that enabled him to say, "You know I can take the high road. And I can quietly put Mary away and that way she can leave the community; she can go somewhere else to have her child and perhaps that child might be adopted. And in later years she might be able to return to the community and no one will have to know."

So Joseph's immediate response when he found out that Mary was pregnant was to try to find a way to quietly let this happen so that there would not be disgrace for Mary and her family. But then Joseph received the visitation that finally lead him to also express his faith and to stay as Mary's betrothed and to become Mary's husband. In the midst of all of the scandal to believe that God was somehow at work in this situation; and that God was using Mary and Joseph to do something wonderful and bring something wonderful to the world.

Some will say that Mary ran to her aunt Elizabeth and stayed with her for 6 months because she didn't want people to know that she was pregnant. She didn't want the disgrace of the community. But I believe she went to Elizabeth because

there was another message yet to come. And that was that her aunt Elizabeth was pregnant and that the one who would be born before Jesus was to be the one who would go before Jesus in this story of great faith and great salvation. That Elizabeth would give birth to the one that who would be known as John the Baptist. And cousins would embark upon this journey later in their life together. No, Mary did not run to her aunt to hide, because the story tells us that Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the late days of her pregnancy so that she and her husband and her child - which I'm sure she knew would be born when they got to Bethlehem - that they might be counted in the census that Rome had ordered.

Mary was a great woman of faith; a faith beyond her years that as a young woman she would receive the news that she would bear God's son and that she would faithfully carry that child full-term and be with that child. Even in our reading today when Jesus is found missing from the family after a visit to Jerusalem, that as a good mother would do, she gets him aside and says "Why did you do this? We were searching for you; we were worried sick for you." Mary traveled with him each step of the way; even ultimately to the cross as Richmond has reminded us this day.

Think what would have happened if Mary would've said no to Gabriel. Think what would of happened if Mary found a way to miscarry the child that she was bearing. Think what would've happen if indeed she woul've gone to another town and given birth to Jesus, but then placed him up for adoption and someone else raised him. No, Mary, we don't have to think that because we know the story. She said to Gabriel, "Let it be to me according to your word." And it was. And our lives are different because of it. What would you have done if you were in Mary's shoes? What would you have said to Gabriel when that news came to you that you were going to bear a child and you had not been with anyone? What would you have done if you were Joseph and you had received this news that the one to whom you were engaged was now pregnant? Would you have

tried to find a way to quietly get her out of your life? Would you have tried to find a way maybe not so quietly to get her out of your life?

The reality is that Jesus seeks to be born into our lives this day. That God, each time we awake, God wants us to say, "Yes, allow Jesus to come into my life and into my heart." And Mary and Joseph are examples of how to respond to that invitation from God; to say to God, "Let it be to me according to your word." Today the savior seeks to be born anew in the life of this world. And the way that happens now is through the lives of those who profess to follow the way of Jesus. To say yes once again to God and to allow that child to come into our lives and into our hearts because he is our savior; he is the Messiah - the one who has not only saved us, but seeks to save the lost of the world.

And so, Mary's story in many ways is our story because we are invited to allow Christ to be born anew within our hearts each and every day. What will you say this day when you hear the angel Gabriel bringing the news that God is doing this wonderful thing in your midst? Will you be like Mary and say, "Let it be to me according to your word"?

Thanks be to God, Amen.