

Sunday, March 8, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

The *First Follower*: Mary of Nazareth

Luke 1:26-38 & Luke 1:39-56

INTRODUCTION:

This year, during the five weeks of Lent, leading up to Holy Week and Easter, many of you are meeting together in small discussion groups to look closely at The *First Followers* of Jesus. Each week you read from the same material crafted by our Christian Education Team. Each week focuses on one particular disciple from material found in all four Gospels. This way we hope to form a three-dimensional rendering of their character, a fleshed out sense of their humanity, their struggles and ultimately, their devotion in believing that this poor, homeless, scraggly man, was in fact, the Son of God! Each of them has a unique backstory, none of them were particularly religious or thought of as "holy". In fact, all of them were quite ordinary, if not marginal. No one would ever peg this motley cast of characters as the "chosen ones of God" to spearhead the largest religious revolution in the history of the planet!

Beginning today and every week leading up to Palm Sunday, Gail and I will also focus our Sunday worship and sermons around the *First Follower* that the small groups will be discussing during the week. That way, even if you are not able to be part of a group, we can all walk this journey together. Anyone can download the *First Followers* booklet found on our website. (triconchurch.org)

As we zero in on an individual character and learn about their unique story arc, we hope to discover how we, ordinary if not marginal, people might follow in the Way of Jesus with some new insight and greater understanding. Last week, the discussion groups spoke about that impulsive, hot-tempered, ruffian named Peter, whom Jesus actually called, "The Rock of the Church." This week we are taking a look at *THE First Follower*, Mary of Nazareth.

The mother-to-be of the Son of God was just a young teenager, living in a dusty, out of the way town called Nazareth. Young Mary had no special qualifications except she was A. single B. Jewish and C. a girl of marrying age. Just before her entrance into the story we meet Mary's aunt Elizabeth who, to her shame and disgrace, suffered from infertility and at this point in her life was way past even hoping to conceive. Suddenly, the Angel Gabriel appears to her husband, Zechariah-the-priest and before you know it, Auntie Liz is with child! Six months later, the very same Angel-of-miraculous-births, is given another assignment by God. Here is how Luke tells it...



SCRIPTURE 1

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.

SERMON

God of surprise and wonder, open our minds and soften our hearts to receive the fullness of this beautiful and remarkable story. How does Mary's story give us insight into the ways that we might follow You today? As we explore Your word, may all our words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.

When I was about young Mary's age, my mother forced me to attend weekly confirmation classes at the Catholic church. After all, to be confirmed is a Sacrament for Catholics, so this was non-negotiable. At the time, one of the few things I was really good at was **not** paying attention in any class environment. But these catechism classes pressed all my skills to the limit. You see, there were two nuns who were fierce in maintaining strict order in the class. The two of them scrutinized us like prison guards while the priest read from a Church approved curriculum. It was excruciating.

What I came away with was the idea that Mary was nearly a god in her own right and that "God the Father" was quite angry with my bad behavior, but somehow if I really believed in Jesus' crucifixion, I would start living the sanctified holy life of a saint, like the Apostle Peter or the Blessed Virgin Mary. God's approval was apparently reserved for those who never swore, always told the truth, and eradicated all thoughts about sex. God-pleasing children obeyed their parents and the Pope, went to Mass every Sunday, were always kind to their siblings and respectful of teachers. They never experimented with alcohol or weed and never danced wildly to rock and roll music. Under the

condemning glare of angry nuns, I learned that to become worthy of God's favor I must become impeccably disciplined in obeying God's rulebook. It was up to me.

I didn't consider myself a bad kid, but I just never had any desire or ability to make myself into something, the priest said, would make me worthy of God's approval. Besides, I didn't know anyone who even came close to that standard!

Even though I eventually did get confirmed, I really never could say yes to this conditional God who said "only if you are good enough." I wasn't.

And so I have often wondered how young Mary said yes to God so quickly. What was she like before Gabriel's visit? Did God look upon her so favorably because she followed the Hebrew law so perfectly? I sincerely doubt it. As I have come to understand, I think that it is simply God's nature to look upon poor peasant girls and prostitutes and tax collectors and adulterous kings and rude fishermen with favor. It seems clear to me from the Scripture stories I read that God's favor consistently comes to the imperfect, sketchy, rule breaking, unsanctified and unlikely ones.

Still, what is amazing to me is that Mary's immediate response to this preposterous and very dangerous proposal is a quick and decisive, "yes." Maybe you have to have the innocence of a youthful, sheltered country girl to allow this kind of faith. How did she actually believe that the Holy Spirit would impregnate her and that her illegitimate child would somehow be born "holy" and grow to be called Son of God? I really don't know, but it could be that her ability to trust in God that much is what gained her favored status. Mary completely trusted what the angel said to her was true and was willing to surrender everything over to the God she already knew to be good and faithful. The God who gazed upon her lovingly. The God who called her "beloved". So, when the angel sent by God said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary was affirmed in her worth before God. She knew deep in her young soul that this was the God that was completely for her and to whom she belonged. This had nothing to do with a transaction based on her ability to clean up her act and earn God's approval. I think Mary's story teaches us that it has more to do with simply trusting that you are already unconditionally loved by God. I think Gabriel's message simply affirmed what Mary already knew and it was easy to say "yes, whatever, here I am."

From the moment Mary said "yes, let it be with me according to your word." She became firmly rooted in her indestructible worth as God's beloved. She knew that no matter what anyone may say about her condition or the legitimacy of her son, she can and will endure all of it, because her entire identity and sense of true belonging is not rooted in the shallow soil of social approval but in the rich, verdant soil of God's unwavering favor for her. All she can say is "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." How different would your life be if you truly trusted that God is for you?

And then, from this life altering encounter, deeply grounded in trust, Mary packs her bags and immediately leaves Nazareth to go to aunt Elizabeth's to help bring her child to term. You remember Elizabeth, wife of the priest, who in her old age has also conceived a son after a visit from Gabriel. Listen to what happens next...

SCRIPTURE continued

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

SERMON continued

Mary's immediate response to her close encounter with God is to be of service to those in need. Her faith is manifest in tangible action. God's loving-kindness fills her to overflowing and she naturally is compelled to pour out this blessing any way she can. Mary's discipleship roots begin to germinate as joy is shared in service. Meanwhile, the judgmental voices that seek to accuse her, shame her and question her integrity are silenced as she surrounds herself with those who love her as God loves her. All the *First Followers* found strength in community.

Upon her arrival, Mary is overwhelmed with Elizabeth's joyous welcome. She probably wasn't sure how Elizabeth and Zechariah would respond to her "condition". She had a lot

of time to think and ponder about God's ways along the journey here. When Elizabeth cries out, "Blessed are you among women!" Mary cannot hold in what God has taught her. The Magnificat spills out of her more like an ecstatic psalm from some bearded old prophet than a young peasant girl from Nazareth. But here we see the depth of her understanding. She proclaims the same radical and dangerous message that Jesus would base his entire ministry on. God will scatter the proud, bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly. This is also Mary's lived experience and is the foundation of her trust.

Even still, in the years ahead, Mary will find herself a homeless refugee, fleeing for her life and the life of her newborn son. She will stand beside him as he is rejected by his home town, called a blasphemer by the religious authorities and eventually, Mary will witness the horror of his gruesome public execution, even though he committed no crime.

Through it all, Mary's trust in God's favor and faithfulness will carry her through all the uncertainty and suffering. To love the way God loves, and value what God values is also to agree to suffer as Jesus suffered. The Good News does not sit well with those in power who have much to lose.

The *First Followers* of Jesus learned quickly that power, wealth and fame are fleeting and often deceptive and void of meaning. They all eventually learned that only God's word - God's promises - are utterly reliable and will endure beyond all suffering and overturn every injustice. This is the word that defines all of us as entirely worthy, loved and accepted just as we are. Not the word of SAT scores. Not the word of credit scores and profit statements, not the word of Facebook posts, twitter feeds, or social status. Not the word of the news cycle and polling data. Not the word of brow beating, angry nuns and board priests. This is the word of God, the very same word that spoke the cosmos into being. The same word of God that breathed life into all humanity and said "yes, it is good." The same word of God that found a young peasant girl entirely worthy, and that word defined the rest of her life.

How might your life be defined differently if you were no longer afraid of what might be - what others might say? How might your life be defined differently if you knew you can't possibly earn God's favor? How might your life be liberated if you really trusted, as Mary did, that you too are already favored, esteemed beyond measure and known by God as the beloved one? Would you too say yes to God's invitation? Give it some thought and maybe we too can join with Mary in this humble prayer; "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

YES! and Amen!