

Last week I talked about a Christmas card I received that had a picture of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus on the cover. It was a different card, not because of the people on the cover, but because of their expressions. Joseph and Mary looked as if they had just been run over by a freight train! That should really come as no surprise because the whole Christmas story is shocking, and it certainly is not how we would expect God to enter this world and become one of us.

Mary was engaged to Joseph. They were two ordinary Jewish people living in an ordinary town called Nazareth. They were not movie stars or professional athletes or famous political figures. They were just regular, everyday people. If their relationship was anything like most others then it had been arranged. People back then didn't get engaged the way we get engaged today. Joseph didn't walk into Zales and pick out a ring for Mary. He didn't take her to a steak house on the Sea of Galilee and pop the question, but they were engaged to be married nonetheless. Mary was more than likely a young teenage girl at the time she got the big news from the angel Gabriel.

I can't help but imagine what it would be like for a teenage girl living in our day to get the news from Gabriel. I can see it now. She is shopping at the mall with her friends talking on her cell phone that her parents told her to use sparingly. She just tried on a pair of jeans at the Gap and was asking one of her friends what she thought of them when it happened – right there in the middle of a store in a mall. An angel tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me, I hate to interrupt your fashion show here, but I have some news for you. Don't be afraid or alarmed, but I'm an angel sent from God to tell you that you are pregnant. And by the way, you're not just pregnant with a regular Joe. You are carrying in your womb the Son of God." The angel departs and the girl looks at her friend and asks, "So, what do you think? Should I get both pair of jeans or just one?"

How would a teenage girl respond to that kind of news today? Who knows? Your guess is as good as mine, but we do know one thing for sure. We know how Mary responded. When Gabriel filled her in on the scoop, Mary responded honestly and innocently, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" I can't think of anything better to say, and why not? Mary was a virgin and virgins don't have babies. Mary wasn't being sarcastic or difficult; she was just asking the obvious question. Gabriel told her not to

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worry about it. God had it covered. Then something remarkable happened. Instead of pressing the issue and asking 20 questions, Mary showed exactly why God chose her to give birth to Jesus. She said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Wow! That was an easy sell!

I think back to the Old Testament in the book of Exodus when God tried to convince Moses to go and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It was like pulling teeth! God had instructed Moses to assemble the elders of Israel and tell them that He had told Moses to go and lead the people out. Moses responded, “What if they don’t believe me?” God said, “What is that in your hand?” Moses said, “A staff.” God said, “Throw it down on the ground.” Moses threw it to the ground and it became a snake. God then told Moses to pick up the snake by the tail. Moses picked up the snake by the tail and it became a staff again. God said, “Go do that in front of the people and they will believe that you and I have talked.”

God then took it a step further. God said, “If they don’t believe you after the staff thing, then try this. Put your hand inside your cloak.” Moses put his hand inside his cloak and when he pulled it out it was leprous. God told him to put it back in his cloak and pull it out again. When he pulled his hand out it was back to normal. God then said, “If they don’t believe you after the staff and the hand trick, then go take some water from the Nile and pour it on the ground. When the water hits the ground it will turn into blood.” After all that Moses said to God, “You know I’m not real eloquent. I’m slow of speech and slow of tongue.” God replied, “Well, who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But Moses said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” At that point God became angry and essentially said, “Take your brother Aaron and get on with it. Go!” Moses eventually went and accomplished some great things, but it took some prodding and pushing at the beginning.

We all respond to God differently. Some of us are like Moses. We need to be reassured and when push comes to shove, we will do whatever God asks us to do, but not without putting up a fight first. Then there are those like Mary. I wish I was more like Mary. I wish I could say what she said more often – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” That was another way of saying, “I trust you God. I put my whole life into your hands and you do whatever you want with me.

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I'm here to serve and be obedient to you." If you want a good biblical model of faith let me offer up Mary. Can you think of a better example of faith? Think about it. She was a teenage girl engaged to Joseph and the law said that if she gets pregnant before marriage then she should be put to death. She didn't even bring that up with Gabriel. She could have very easily said, "You know Gabriel I appreciate you coming and sharing the news with me, but what about that law? I don't mind carrying the Son of God, but how am I going to explain this and who is going to protect me?" That would have been very understandable for her to have asked that question, but she didn't. She left the details to God.

One thing I have become convinced of is that when we make ourselves available God does some amazing things. Mary had not been to the school of "Giving Birth to the Son of God". She had not had training in how to raise the Son of God, nor had she been taught how to go from one day being just another girl to the mother of Jesus. God doesn't call the qualified. God calls whomever he wants and then qualifies and equips them. In other words, it doesn't matter what you and I think we can and can't do. What matters is whether or not we have said what Mary said – "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Mary can be admired on all sorts of levels. One of those, as we have already noted, is her willingness to go along with the idea in the first place. Another is her song of praise. In verses 46-55 we have what has traditionally been called Mary's Magnificat. It's her song of praise to God for blessing her. Listen to the words. The praise is just flowing from Mary's lips:

"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 great 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 his descendants forever."
(Luke 1:46-55)

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This is the song of a woman who understood her relationship with God and others. She knew that she was blessed, and she also knew that it was all God's doing. It's so easy sometimes to give ourselves all the credit and forget to thank God for all that God has done for us. It would have been very easy for Mary to have developed an inflated ego. I can hear the conversation now. Mary goes to visit one of her best friends. She asks her friend, "What have you been up to?" Her friend replies, "Oh, not much just the regular stuff. What about you? What have you been doing?" Mary answers, "Oh, I haven't been up to much either, it's been the regular ho-hum. Really the only thing that has been out of the ordinary was a visit from the angel Gabriel. He told me I am going to give birth to God's Son. So besides God selecting me out of all the women in the world to be the mother of his one and only Son, I haven't been too busy lately!"

Mary had every right to get a big head. God chose her out of all the people in the world to be the one to give birth to Jesus, but Mary didn't let it go to her head. In fact, she handled the whole situation with incredible maturity and humility. Mary was a woman of great faith and humility. Perhaps we should take note of Mary's personal characteristics and understand that there was a good reason God selected her to be the mother of Jesus. I don't think we can overstate just how humble Mary was throughout this incredible story.

Someone once said to Winston Churchill, "Doesn't it thrill you that whenever you speak the hall is filled to overflowing?" Churchill replied, "Yes, that is quite an honor to have that many people come and hear me make a political speech, but I am reminded that if I was being hanged the crowd would be twice as large!" I think at some level we could all relate to what Churchill said. I like what Philip Brooks once said about humility: "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is." The "higher nature" for us is Jesus Christ and to be humble does not mean that we discount ourselves or think any lower of ourselves than we should. To be humble is to be like Mary – to feel good about ourselves, yet at the same time be able to consider others before ourselves. Maybe that is what all of us should remember, especially during Christmas.

Speaking of humility and putting others before ourselves, the faculty and children at Otis Brown Elementary in Irving can certainly teach us a

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lesson in that area. There is an eight-year-old student at Otis Brown named Zachary. Zachary suffers from a degenerative disease called Duchenne muscular dystrophy. It is getting harder and harder for Zachary to walk and get around. More than a year ago the staff started collecting money to buy Zachary's family a van that could carry the boy, his brother and their wheelchairs. It has been a slow process, but they have raised over \$22,000 through various fund-raisers. They've had raffles, garage sales, etc. It is now to the point where everyone, faculty and students, wants to make this dream of purchasing a \$40,000 specialized van a reality.

Part of all this attention and focus on helping Zachary is the natural enthusiasm kids share for a fun cause. But much of it is due to their love of Zachary and his natural charm. One of his teachers said, "He brings out the good side of the other children." Even the most notorious playground bullies are protective of Zachary. When a reporter from the Dallas Morning News asked Zachary whether he preferred schooldays or weekends, he replied, "*Christmas!*"

If the way Zachary's classmates and teachers have been treating him is the way Christmas is supposed to be, then I think I agree with Zachary. I prefer Christmas over any other day too.