

December 20, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

There's Something About Mary

Luke 1:26-38

Pastor Tom Anderson

Today I want to celebrate with you the Virgin Mary and her very special place in the Christmas story and in the heart of every believer. She should be our hero and a role model for every Christian believer. Understanding what makes her so special will bring us all closer to the true meaning of Christmas.

Mary is first introduced to us in Luke 1:27 as “a virgin”. The story we are about to hear is a miracle that beggars our imagination—a virgin birth. There is a good historical case to be made for this wonder. First of all we know that Jesus’ conception and birth was irregular. The Jews viewed Jesus with great suspicion, in the midst of an argument with Jesus they threw this zinger at him, “We are not illegitimate children. The only Father we have is God himself.” (John 8:41) The innuendo against Jesus here is not too subtle: they believe he is illegitimate. We know that the story of Mary’s virginity is independently confirmed by Matthew’s gospel. Luke says, “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning...” (Luke 1:3) Luke traveled with Paul and surely had opportunity to meet many of the apostles as well as Mary and interview them first hand. Given the embarrassing suspicions about Jesus’ birth it is unlikely that Luke would retell the story of the virgin birth unless he believed it was true. Jesus’ brother James was a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church and his presence would have prevented the church from making up wild stories about his mother. Even the most skeptical among us has to admit, it is difficult to explain the virgin birth if it is not based in fact.

The Virgin is then greeted by Gabriel as “you who are highly favored.” (Luke 1:28) We honor Mary as highly favored of God. She is part of a long line of saints who have found special favor with God: Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. Favor means grace, and ours is a religion of grace. God chooses us for salvation, not because of who we are, but in spite of who we are. No one knew this better than Paul, who hated Christ and hated Christians, but God chose him to preach Christ and make disciples. Marveling over the incredible turn of affairs in his life, Paul could only say, “By the grace of God, I am what

I am.” (1 Corinthians 15:10). God’s grace has now appeared in the flesh in Jesus Christ. He is the grace of God freely offered to the world. By receiving Christ as your Savior and believing in him you gain access to God’s grace. You become, like Mary, highly favored of God.

God is with Mary (Luke 1:28). This resembles closely the words an angel spoke to Gideon in the Old Testament. Gideon was down threshing his wheat in a hole in the ground for fear of raiders when the angel came to him and told him not to fear because God was with him. (Judges 6:12) What does this mean? It means God has our back; God will not let us fail in his purpose. It does not mean we will have an easy, comfortable or safe life. We could face an inconvenient pregnancy, or unemployment or an arduous journey, but God promises to see us through. “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32)

Jesus did not promise his followers that they would not have to go through hell. He promised that the gates of hell themselves would not prevail. We may find ourselves surrounded by devils, but God will see us through. He is with us and we will prevail. When all we see is doom and dead-ends, God sees resurrection. No more encouraging words could ever be spoken to the human heart than these, God is with you. Jesus promised to be with his followers to the ends of the earth and to the close of the age. (Matthew 28:20) You can count on this.

In Luke 1:29, we read that “Mary was greatly troubled...and wondered....” Here we see her humanity. Who would not react with trouble and wonder if they heard the Christmas story for the first time?

Last year I was visiting an elderly shut-in in beautiful downtown Chassell, Michigan. Her four- and five-year-old grandchildren named Seth and Dakota burst into the house. I engaged them in conversation just before I was going to leave. I asked them if they had a favorite Christmas carol. And they said they knew “Frosty the Snowman,” but what was a Christmas carol? I explained it was a song that celebrates the birth of Jesus, and they asked, who was he and what was that? Can you imagine living on earth for five years and not knowing who Jesus is and what Christmas is? I was shocked, yet I also realize there are thousands of American children just like these.

I pulled out my pocket Bible, and I read them the story of Christmas. The children sat down in silence and listened. Their jaws dropped and they were mouth breathing and hanging on every word. When I finished there was silence—the silence of wonder. I could see wheels turning in them that had never been turned before. Then Dakota piped up and said, “Mister, can we come to your church on Christmas? I would like to here some more about Jesus.”

None of us can recapture the feeling of hearing about Christmas for the first time. But I do wish that you had some of Mary’s trouble and wonder this year, because wonder is the basis of worship and it is the beginning of understanding.

The angel then tells Mary that she will be the Christ-bearer: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David....” (Luke 1:32)

God had made this promise to King David in 2nd Samuel 7:11-16:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.

The house here is David’s line of descendants. God will treat these descendants like sons. He will discipline them as is necessary in the course of history but he will not remove his love from them. David’s line will endure unbroken for ever. In this sense, Jesus is the Son of David, the Christ of David’s line come to restore the throne of Israel.

But Jesus is more than the Christ—a figurative son of God. He is the very Son of God, begotten of the father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God and of one being with the Father.

The angel explains this further in Luke 1:35, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” So Jesus is the Son of God not just in the figurative sense like the kings of Judah but quite literally through the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit on the womb of Mary. This is no earthly man; this is a man from heaven.

The verb “overshadow” is the same word used in the Old Testament to describe how the presence of God would rest upon the tabernacle built by the Hebrews during their wandering in the wilderness. When Moses built the tabernacle for worship, the glory of God overshadowed it and filled it, and the people then knew that God was present among them. (Exodus 40:34) They called it the “tent of meeting.” Mary is the new tabernacle. Her womb is the new “tent of meeting.” We meet with God himself when we come to Jesus Christ. Mary is special because she carried God in her womb and gave birth to him at Bethlehem.

None of us can do what Mary did, but today everyone who believes in Christ is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to be born in you spiritually. Paul said to the Galatians, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...” (Galatians 4:19) Jesus wants to live in you and take control of your life. He wants to take your worries and your agenda and even your heart so that he can replace it with his. Jesus said, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20) If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then he has come in. He lives in you. You may not feel it, but he is there because he promised to be, and we count on his word, not on our feelings.

There is one more special thing about Mary—her surrendering faith. In Luke 1:38 she says, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” That is the proper response to Christmas, to become God’s servants. Are you a servant? As a church, our job is not done when people feel good about themselves. Our job is not done when people have had enough to eat. Our job is done when the people we serve become servants of God who surrender their lives to be shaped by the word of God, when we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God and brothers and sisters that word has become flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.