

I have appreciated the Advent sermon series on the Magnificat of Mary because I think Mary as a model for faith has long been overlooked by Protestants. I think it may be because we just don't know what to do with her. We tend to think the Roman Catholics say entirely too much about her and as a result we say too little, essentially reducing her to a womb, the necessary but rather embarrassing means by which Jesus comes into the world—a figure in a Nativity scene that we have to bring out this time of year, but which we gladly pack away when the season is over.

But I think this way of looking at Mary misses her courage, her faith, her steadfastness. She was so much more than a convenient womb. She was profoundly, deeply, utterly human. And it is her very humanity that is key to the lesson she may have to teach us all.

The traditional understanding of Mary makes her response to the angel Gabriel and his astounding announcement that Mary will bear the Son of God a foregone conclusion. Of course she will say yes. What else could she say but "yes"?

How about "no"? Writer Frederick Buechner describes how easy it would have been for her to say "no"—and just how much was at stake.

*She struck the Angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.*

*He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.*

*As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings that he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl. (Beyond Words, p. 124)*

Think about it—she could have said "no." The whole proposition, after all, once you get past the glitz and glamour of the angelic messenger, doesn't really have that much to recommend it. There's potential death—Mary is betrothed, which is the same as being married—she could be charged with adultery and stoned to death. There's certain disgrace—even if Joseph somehow, miraculously marries her, everyone in Nazareth can count to nine. It will be clear when this baby was conceived. She'll be shamed and disgraced for the rest of her life, Nazareth's dirty joke. It's all just too risky. If Mary paused to think about it for five minutes—if she looked past the Stephen Spielberg special effects of her angel visitor and really thought about what she was being asked to do, there was every reason in the world to say no.

And those are just the risks she could foresee—there was so much she couldn't foresee. You have to wonder how many times, in the weeks and months and years to come, Mary wondered if she should have said no.

She must have wondered if she should have said no on that long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, undertaken in the dead of winter. And when they finally got to Bethlehem and found every door locked tight against them and no place to sleep except in a stable, surely Mary had second thoughts. And that night, when she, little more than a child herself, squatted amidst the hay and dirt and manure to give birth among the animals, with no midwife except her frightened husband, Mary must have remembered Gabriel's words, "The Lord is with you." Along with the words of her cousin Elizabeth, "Blessed are you among women!" Surely she could be forgiven if she thought, a little bitterly, that she didn't feel like the Lord was with her, and that she certainly didn't feel blessed.

But then the baby was born, whole and healthy. And when she cradled him and nursed him, marveling as all new mothers do, over his tiny toes, delicate fingers and shell-like little ears, no doubt she felt God's presence. When the shepherds came—stumbling and fearful and awestruck, with their confused account of angelic choirs, she must have known God was with her. And after the shepherds, the exotic visitors from a foreign land somewhere to the east, bringing with them gifts fit for a king, perhaps she began to catch a glimpse of God's plan for her son.

The gospel says Mary pondered all of these remarkable occurrences in her heart. Did she remember them when she and Joseph took eight-day old Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised, and the holy man Simeon confirmed that this baby was indeed the Messiah? Did Mary remember them in that moment of joy, when the old man turned to her and said, "*A sword will pierce your heart.*" Those are words I'm sure she pondered many, many times in the years to come.

When twelve year old Jesus was lost for three days in Jerusalem, and his parents finally found him calmly discussing theology with the teachers in the Temple and Mary didn't know whether to hug him or slap him, but Jesus coolly dismissed his mother's three days of frantic searching by saying, "Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" *A sword will pierce your heart.*

The adult Jesus often seems cold in his dealings with his mother. When at the wedding at Cana, she told him they were running out of wine to serve the guests, he replied, "Woman, what have you to do with me?" When Jesus, teaching a crowd, is told that Mary and his brothers are outside and want to speak with him, what does Jesus do? Does he leap up and run to greet the mother he hasn't seen in months, perhaps years? Does he bring her in and proudly introduce her? Does he give her a seat of honor at the dinner table? He doesn't do any of those things. Instead he says, "Who is my mother?" and adds that anyone who does God's will is his mother. *A sword will pierce your heart.*

And when she stood at the foot of the cross, watching her son die a slow and agonizing death, as the sword pierced her heart in the most painful way imaginable, did Mary remember that sunny day more than thirty years ago when Gabriel had hailed her as God's favored one and told her she would bear God's son? Did she wonder what kind of God would let his son die such a terrible death? Did she wish she had turned and run away instead of saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

We can't know, of course, what was in Mary's heart—not when Gabriel came, not in all the pain and joy of Jesus' life, not in the last agonizing moments of his death. We only know that this young girl found it in herself to say "yes" to God's extraordinary proposal. "Let it be with me according to your word."

This is the supreme lesson Mary has to teach us—the courage to say "yes" to God's plan for our lives. Like Mary, we cannot know where that "yes" will take us. We cannot know what strange and difficult roads we will be asked to travel. We cannot know what joy or what pain will come to us. But Mary teaches us that in joy or in sorrow, in good times and bad, in our belief and in our doubt, God is with us, and that God will see us through whatever may come.

Mary's yes gave birth not just to a baby, but to a whole new understanding of God, the possibility of a whole new relationship with God for all humanity. Perhaps our "yes" doesn't carry such potential, but every time one of us says "yes" to God, God's will becomes little clearer and God's kingdom comes a little closer.

Mary's yes shows us the way: Let it be with us according to God's word.

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