

December 24, 2006/Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve/David L. Edwards

Mary's Faith and Ours

Luke 1:39-55 *“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*

Luke gives us Mary as a person of faith, aware of and believing in God's purpose for her life. We know nothing really of the circumstances of Mary's life. Yet the story reveals much about her soul, her spirit, as she responded to the presence and movement of God in her life. She can be for us an example or model of faith and the life of faith.

In the story of Mary, we discover that the right attitude of faith is **perplexity and wonder**. It is not about having answers or even knowing exactly what God is doing in our lives. When Gabriel tells Mary what God wants to do through her life for the sake of the world, Mary is both perplexed [*diatarasso*: confused, perplexed] and obedient. These two things go together. Mary is amazed that God wants to use her small life to do something for the world. She doesn't really understand it, but nonetheless gives herself to it. That is what faith is for us, too--wonder and obedience. God's desire to be in and work through our lives is beyond our comprehension. That realization fills us with wonder, amazement, even confusion. This makes room in us for God's purposes, creates in us **willingness, or obedience**.

At the end of Mary's encounter with Gabriel, she says: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” It is a classic statement of faith, the willingness to put ourselves at God's disposal. The prophets said it: Here am I; send me! Jesus said it in an agonizing way in the Garden of Gethsemani as he faced his death: Not my will but yours, O God, be done. It is the opening of our lives to God, the very power and source of life, to be servants of the life God wants to give to the world through us.

These days of Advent and Christmas remind us that being amazed and filled with wonder is more spiritually valuable than being secure in our beliefs and religious ideas. When our minds are full of answers and information, especially a lot of religious stuff, there is no room for God. God can use our sense of wonder because it keeps us open and receptive. Then we are ready to place our lives

in God's service. Here I am, your servant; let it be with me according to your word.

Central to the vision of this church has been that we each are called by Jesus to bring the whole of our lives into the service of God. This doesn't happen overnight and none of us has arrived there yet. We are always becoming aware of parts of ourselves that are not open to God, that are resistant to the presence and movements of God's love and will. Our spiritual work is to open the whole of our lives, little by little, to God and the flow of God's love through us into the world. What might be blocking the way of God in and through us? Our fear? Our anger? Our hurts? Our insecurities that keep us holding onto things that we think give us security? Whatever it is, we can become aware of it and work with it gently so that we can let it go, making more room for God, for faith. Mary shows us that wonder and obedience go together. Our sense of wonder at the mystery of God's presence with us creates in us the desire, the willingness, and the courage to let our lives become more and more open to God.

The second thing about Mary's faith is something Elizabeth says to her. Here are two women who are related, both pregnant by mysterious circumstances. Elizabeth is married, getting on in years, as Luke tells us, and unable to have children. All of a sudden she is pregnant with John who will be the prophet/baptizer who points to Jesus as the Messiah. Mary is very young, probably no more than fifteen years old. There is deep joy in their meeting. Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed because **she believed that God would do what God promised to do**.

That's another thing about faith. It is **the belief that God will do what God promises to do for us and the world**. No matter how things look now, no matter how bad the situation is, God will faithfully keep working to bring new life. “Belief” here does not mean something that happens in our heads. It is not rational, in that sense. The Letter to the Hebrews says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1).” Belief is something that happens in our hearts, at the core of our being. Belief is a matter of the soul, the heart, the guts, if you will. It is counting on God's promise with our whole being, even when everything around us speaks against it.

We know something of this from our experience with each other as human beings. When someone tells us they are going to do something, we trust that they will do it. We know that with some

people that word of promise is a sure thing. It may take some time for the person to get it done, but we trust that it will be done. With other people, we have learned the pain and frustration that occur when they don't fulfill or complete what was promised.

Central to the life of faith is the deep belief that God will do what God has promised to do for the world. No matter how things look now, whether we see it in our lifetime or not, we believe that God will bring to the world the reign of justice, compassion, mercy, and peace. We believe that God's love is more powerful than hate or greed or fear. We are not naïve about the realities of human violence or injustice. We just live our lives out of the belief that these things are contrary to God's will and do not have the final word. This frees us to live without anxiety, fear, or despair.

The third and last thing I want to say about Mary's faith is that **faith celebrates what God has already done and what will be completed**. Her song expresses the paradoxical nature of the life of faith. What God wants for the world has already been accomplished. It is both a done deal and yet to be fully completed.

Mary sings a song of praise because she sees her life as blessed. It is blessed because she has been called to participate in God's bringing of new life to the world. Mary sees how her own small life is connected to the life of the world, that her life can be not only a blessing to her but to many people.

What God has done in Mary's life has already had an impact on the world. The whole destructive and unjust order of human life has been reversed. A death-blow has been struck at the heart of human power, arrogance, and injustice. God's presence in Jesus is revealed as being decisively with the lowly, the humble, those who are without power, the hungry and the poor. With the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Mary's child, the tables have already been turned. The way, the truth, and the life has dawned and been made utterly clear.

And yet it is not fully completed. We know that well enough. An old Jewish story: A young man runs into the rabbi's office. "Rabbi, Rabbi, the Messiah has come!" The wise old man slowly gets up from his desk and walks to the window, where he looks out for a good while. Finally, he turns and says, "My son, how can this be? The world is still the same." We must surely feel that way as well. Sometimes this paradox of faith is extremely difficult for us, times when it simply does not make any sense to us. If Jesus was the Messiah, if God acted so decisively for the world in Jesus,

why hasn't the world changed? It is easy to make the argument that the world of human beings is in worse shape than ever before. Our destructiveness. Our apathy. Our disregard for God's creation. How could it get any worse?

This is where it is so important that we affirm the paradox of faith. We celebrate the decisive presence of God in Jesus, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. This is the already of faith, what God has done in turning the tables and bringing in the kingdom. That is what we celebrate at Christmas time. It can only be celebrated with joy, as a gift, a gracious event of God's redeeming love. But there is also the not yet of faith, God's call to us in Jesus to be part of the unfolding of that kingdom, that new order of things, to make our lives instruments of God's love and will. The life of faith affirms both the already and the not yet of God's actions.

I offer this prayer for us today, Christmas Eve, and through the coming days of Christmastide:

That each of us in some way will touch again the wonder of faith that is deeper than the workings of our minds.

That we will experience afresh the obedience of faith, the desire to let our lives be the instruments of God's loving will.

That we will rediscover the faith that comes from knowing at the core of our being that God will accomplish what God desires for the world.

That we will touch the joy that comes from knowing God has already made all things new.

And that each of us will become aware of the ways God is calling us to be part of the continuing unfolding of the way, the truth, and the life that has decisively dawned in Jesus Christ.