

Considering Mary

Matthew 1:26-38 *Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."*

Mary is an about-to-be-married girl, probably no older than fifteen. In the view of society and religion, and her husband-to-be Joseph, she is about to become an unwed pregnant teen. In God's view, however, she is about to be part of a completely new thing God is doing. It is outside the boundaries of society and its structures and such. It is beyond the scope of imagination. As wonderful as our capacity to imagine is, we are very limited, really, when it comes to seeing possibilities. Who would think of it? Who would consider it possible that a pregnant teen from small town Palestine would be the catalyst for a whole new era in the spiritual history of the human race? I think John Cougar Mellencamp could write a great new Christmas song out of this. [You can't live in Indiana without getting drawn in to his music!]

We know nothing about Mary except what this story reveals of her spirit and character. The angel Gabriel, who six months before had a similar mission with regard to Mary's older cousin Elizabeth, appears to Mary and announces God's favor. Now, I am now seeing that God's favor being with us means two things. First, God, the very Creator of the whole universe, takes special notice of us. That's a wonderful thing, isn't it? The writer of Psalm 8 said it: "When I consider the wide universe you have made, who are we that you should notice us or even care about us?" However, the favor of God also means that there is something God wants us to do. In this case, young Mary has been chosen for something. It does not have to do with something special or unique about Mary. She could be anyone, anywhere, any time. That's why the stories of God's call are so compelling and why they involve us, too. It has nothing to do with our having certain qualifications or pedigrees or outstanding characteristics. Any of us, anytime, anywhere, any stage of life, can be touched by God's call to serve life in some particular way. God's favor is with us. God's love...and God's call.

Mary is "much perplexed" by Gabriel's words. She wonders what kind of greeting this is, what it means for her. The word here could mean a number of emotions. Perhaps she is suspicious. Perhaps she is in awe. Perhaps she is overwhelmed and completely confused. And, from what Gabriel says next, she is also afraid. Whatever mix of emotions she is experiencing, Mary's first spiritual "qualification," if you will, is that she is capable of spiritual awe and perplexity. She doesn't understand what is going on.

Throughout scripture, we read stories of would-be servants of God, spiritual leaders, who start out just this way. They don't have a clue what is going on. They feel overwhelmed when confronted with the sacred dimension of life. They fall on their faces. They cover their eyes. They don't know what to say. They feel afraid. They are ordinary, garden variety people who have no qualifications, as it were, for receiving some kind of special spiritual visitation or vision or whatever. Mary does not know why God has "found favor with her," and neither do we. God has simply decided to touch this person's life in a particular way so that something special can happen for the world. And for that person it means a whole different way of living--more questions than answers, more mystery than knowledge, more wonder than certainty, and yes, more doubt than dogmatism. The call of God opens up our lives and calls us to embrace uncertainty.

There is something important here. It has to do with what it means to be a "spiritual" person, or a person of faith, or a community of faith, for that matter. It seems on the basis of scripture itself that the most viable channels for God's activity are persons who are completely open, who don't really know what is going on, who have the capacity for awe and mystery, who do not see themselves as in any way special or qualified or expert. This is an important spiritual attitude confirmed in every major religious tradition. The Tao te Ching, written in China five centuries before Jesus, says, "Those who know don't talk, those who talk don't know."(56) Thomas Aquinas, the monumental theologian of the church, who

wrote a mountain of books about every aspect of Christian life and faith, spent the final years of his life in silence. He finally understood that the deepest knowledge of God we can have is that God is unknowable. How about that! Spiritual wisdom and knowledge show themselves not in how smart we think we are or how much we think we know, but in silence and not-knowing. Being faithful Christians does not mean having firm convictions around which we lock our minds, or a rigid morality galvanized with shame, guilt, and judgmentalism. It is easy to reduce religion to a matter of beliefs and morals, then build a church around it where people can feel confident about their goodness and rightness, while judging others who do not share the same outlook. This goes for “liberals” as well as “conservatives.” But that is not the biblical picture of what faith is about. In the story of Mary and elsewhere, faith is an openness to God that lets go our firm grip on our own strength or rightness or anything else. It is an awed perplexity and wonder, and the living of our lives as those who are being led, not building up something or accomplishing a plan.

Gabriel then tells Mary what is going to happen. She will become pregnant and bear a child to be named Jesus. He will be called Son of God and will be given the throne of David forever. He will establish God’s reign completely. I would like to put it this way: He will be the special Son of God who will show us all that we are and help us to be children of God. Mary is again perplexed. How can this happen? I am a virgin, that is, I do not have that kind of relationship with a man. Gabriel responds that the Holy Spirit and the power of God will accomplish this. Even now, says Gabriel, your cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son, and she is an old woman. Nothing is impossible with God.

As I read this very familiar story each morning this week, what began to stand out for me about it was that God is about to do something completely new and unexpected. We tend to call this a miracle. But that is based on the premise that we know everything there is to know about how things work. The premise is wrong. We don’t know everything about how things work. Our glimpse of life is very narrow, even with all of our knowledge. What we call a miracle is simply God working in ways that are beyond our vision. It is not just Mary’s immaculate conception, but Elizabeth’s, too. The point is not Mary herself but God’s power to bring new life, to create a new possibility. And this asks of us what Buddhists call a “don’t know mind.” It is not what we know, but our openness to what we don’t know that creates room for God to work. That is why Jesus said that young children are closer to the kingdom than we adults are. It belongs to young children because they have a “don’t know mind,” a mind that is not yet full of what we call knowledge and is open to wonder, the possible, the new. And I believe that Mary is a child in this way. She is probably young enough to still be considered a child, but she also has that childlike capacity for being in awe of the sacred dimension of life, of not being constrained by a mind crammed with so-called knowledge.

God’s desire and will to bring about something new needs our willingness, our openness. The story concludes with Mary’s opening herself up to this thing that she does not understand and that probably still scares her. Her response is the same as those before her who have responded to God’s call: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.”(1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6:8) Mary opens herself, her life to God. Let it be with me according to your word. With this “let it be with me,” Mary’s life becomes that channel, that instrument of God’s love and will and peace that Francis of Assisi spoke about. This “let it be with me” is the shift in our attitude, spirit, and awareness from a focus on control of ourselves and others and life around us, to instrumentality, to being channels of something greater than ourselves. It is that point at which we lay down our painful and sad efforts to build a life, to construct an identity, to achieve great success for ourselves, and simply open ourselves to God, to the power of life that wants to work through us for the sake of life itself.

Considering Mary in this story helps me to pay fresh attention to the kind of life we try to work with in our community. The life of practicing silence and inner listening, of being more aware of the sacred dimension of life and our own lives. Of discerning the particular way God calls us to share with and live in God’s world. The life of knowing God’s favor--God’s special love for us and God’s call to us. The life of “let it be with me according to your word.”

