

December 21, 2014 / Fourth Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

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."

When reading the stories of Jesus' birth, or other biblical stories, it is important to remember something called "story truth." We consider ourselves modern, scientific folks. We tend to get hung up on things like: Did it really happen that way? Was Mary really a virgin? Are there really angels? And so forth. These issues did not occur to more ancient people who knew how to listen to stories for deeper truth. The truth of stories is has to do with meaning, with the spirit. If we listen with open hearts and minds, we will find ourselves more enlightened by things like what it means to live by faith, or what the story is saying about the nature and purpose of life. Children know how to listen to stories. So let us try to listen as children.

Mary is about to be married and probably no older than fifteen, is about to be part of something new God is doing. God works beyond the tidy little boundaries of society and religion. Who would think of it? A pregnant teen from small, no-place town in Palestine serves as the catalyst for a new era in humanity's spiritual history. As Mary's song in response to Elizabeth's words, which we call the Magnificat, says she is of *low estate*. Yet she experiences the reality of God who does not work through those who are powerful or rich or full, but through the meek, the humble, the hungry, those whose hearts are simple and open, who have willing spirits.

All we know of Mary is from this story, hints of her spirit and character as she reacts to the news Gabriel brings. Gabriel first calls her one who is favored by God. I think that God's favor being with us means at least two things. First, God, the very Power that called forth and sustains the universe, takes special notice of us. What a wonderful thought! The writer of Psalm 8 put it this way: *When I consider the wide universe you have made, who are we that you should even notice us or care about us?* We human beings are not the center of the universe. Neither is the universe indifferent to our existence. We have our unique and rightful place within the universe, the creation. We belong. We are regarded with favor.

The favor of God also means that there is something God wants us to do, an impulse in each of us toward the serving of life in some way. Mary, hardly out of childhood, has been chosen for something. There is nothing unique or special about Mary. She could be anyone. She could be us. 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 special qualifications or pedigrees or outstanding characteristics. Any of us, anytime, anywhere, at any stage of life, can become aware of God's favor, which includes God's call to serve life in some particular way. God's favor is with us as love that cares for and about us, and as call that gives our life purpose. Right there is the framework for our spiritual lives as we work with them in this community. Through the inward journey, we grow in awareness of and growth in God's love, God's favor. Through the outward journey, we discern what it is God has called and gifted us to do to serve life around us.

Mary is *much perplexed* by Gabriel's words. The word used here (*diatarasso*) has a richness of meaning. Mary might be suspicious and wary, filled with awe or overwhelmed and confused ... or all of that. She is certainly scared, for Gabriel tells her not to be afraid. Whatever she is experiencing, Mary's first spiritual *qualification* is that she is capable of awe and perplexity. How about that? To be an authentically spiritual person means we do not really know what is going on! Our scriptures have many stories of called servants of God who start out just this way. They are run-of-the-mill folks who do not have a clue what is happening. They feel overwhelmed when they glimpse the sacred dimension of life. They feel inadequate. They fall on their faces. They cover their eyes. They don't know what to say. We don't know why God finds favor with us. God simply touches our lives in a particular way so that something good can happen for the world through us. This creates a different way of living--more questions than answers, more mystery than knowledge, more wonder than certainty, and more trusting than having to know how things will happen. To live the spiritual life means embracing uncertainty, and wonder, and trust.

There is something very important here about what it means to be a person and a community of faith. Our scriptures tell us that the most viable channels for God's activity are persons who are open, who have the capacity for awe and mystery, who do not see themselves as qualified or as experts, or even as *spiritual*. This is also found in other major spiritual traditions. 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). In other words, those who experience the deep, sacred nature of reality are more inclined to humble and awed silence than to talking about it. Thomas Aquinas, the monumental theologian of the church, wrote a mountain of books about every aspect of Christian life and faith. Yet, he spent the final years of his life in silence. In the end, he saw that the truest knowledge of God is that God is unknowable. How about that!

Spiritual wisdom shows itself not in how smart we are or how much we think we know, but in silence and not-knowing, in receptivity, being empty, not full. Being followers of Jesus does not mean locking our minds around beliefs and doctrines with which we beat others over the head. Being a person of faith does not mean having a rigid morality galvanized with shame, guilt, and judging others. It is easy, and dangerous, to reduce religion to a matter of beliefs and morals, then build a church around it where people can feel confident, even arrogant, about their goodness and rightness, while condemning others who do not share the same understandings and beliefs. This goes for “liberals” and “progressives” as well as “conservatives.” The biblical meaning of faith, as in this story of Mary, is an openness to God that loosens our firm grip on our own strength or rightness or anything else. Faith consists of awed perplexity and wonder, combined with trustful living as those who are being led.

So, Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant and bear a child to be named Jesus. He will be called Son of God and will establish God's reign completely and forever. I would like to put it this way: *He will be the special Son of God who will show us all that we are children of God, and will help us to become what we really and truly are.*

Mary is again perplexed. How can this happen? I do not yet 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. Here again is the insight that God works beyond the boundaries of what we think is possible or impossible. What stands out for me at this point of the story is that God is up to something new and unexpected. We tend to call this a miracle. That is based on the premise that we know everything there is to know about how things work. The premise is wrong. We know a great deal, and that is good. Yet, 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, the Power of Life, working beyond our

limited vision. And this asks us to have 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. They have a “*don’t know mind*” that is open to wonder, the possible, the sacred. Mary still has this childlike capacity for wonder and awe.

God’s desire to bring about something new needs our willingness, our openness. The story concludes with Mary’s giving herself up to this thing that she does not understand and that 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) *Let it be with me according to your word.* This *let it be with me* opens Mary’s life as a channel, an instrument of God’s love for the world. *According to your word* means the message Gabriel has spoken, but also the power that accomplishes this new thing God is doing. God’s *word* (*dabar* in Hebrew, *logos* in Greek) in our scriptures means not only something verbal but also something powerful and dynamic. When God calls us to be or to do something, God also gives the power to accomplish it. Our job is to remain open.

In the past year or two, the word submission has become important to me. This is often how our spiritual life grows and develops and deepens, through words or thoughts that become important for us, for reasons we may not even know. Our friendship with Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid and the World Community / Legacy International has been part of it. Ahmed has helped me understand the meaning of *Islam*, which is literally *submission*. We don’t like the word submission because in our culture it means giving up, or losing, or letting someone dominate us. The true meaning of submission in Islam is giving ourselves to be instruments of God. I have come to understand this, not only through discussions with Ahmed and others, but by seeing it in the lives of people who have intentionally and humbly given themselves to the love and service of God and God’s world.

I will continue to explore this word and this reality of submission. It has become an important way for me to understand and practice what our community is about. Loving God through the inward journey. Serving God’s world through the outward journey. Prayer and service. Becoming more and more an instrument of God’s love and power and will for life, and less ego-centered, with my life bound up in my own concerns, worries, desires, and will for others. In fact, I think this may be what is meant when we speak of *dying and rising with*

Christ, of being *reborn*. It is the dying, little by little, of the smaller self, the ego, and the rising or unfolding or blossoming of our true, God-created self.

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 of our own lives. The discerning of the particular ways 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*, of submission. It is the life of knowing ourselves loved and belonging, and also called to some particular work or ministry of love. It is being willing to move out in that direction, without having to have the answers, without knowing just how it will be possible, where the money, the people, the time, and so forth, will come from. The story of Mary is another story of our journey inward and our journey outward.