

Sermon Title: "All in"

December 20th, 2020 – 4th Sunday in Advent

Text: Luke 1:26-38



Theme:

What's in it for me?

Sermon Text:

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." As Advent transitions to Christmas, we are closer and closer to once again celebrating the Savior's birth, even under the Governor's current restrictions. "Even under the Governor's current restrictions." I never thought I would say that, but this year is quite a different year for us all and it requires, I think, a different response. Now I'm not Catholic, but in our text today Mary does give a great example of faith and trust, something that is to be emulated, so let's take a look at it. You don't have to be Catholic to see in Mary, a great example of faith.

Mary is about 14 or 15 years old and is betrothed to marry Joseph, her distant cousin. Marrying distant cousins was quite common during the 1st century and the betrothal period was around 9 months. This was to ensure that the betrothed female was not already pregnant, so any child born after marriage would be a legitimate heir. If a woman were to become pregnant during the betrothal period, it would have been seen as a betrayal to her parents as well as her groom and his family as most marriages at this time were arranged. There was no Options Pregnancy Center to help young mothers-to-be back then. In fact, getting pregnant during the betrothal period could be a capital offense at that time. Remember what was going to happen to the woman caught in adultery before Jesus intervened? And there is no record of that woman being pregnant. Even though Mary wasn't yet officially considered married, a charge of adultery could be brought against her if she were to be found with another man during the betrothal period. The betrothal period was a period of anticipation for the bride, but also a period of great danger.

This is the reality that Mary finds herself in while living in Nazareth. She is minding her own business, and she's visited by the angel Gabriel. It's the same angel that visits Zechariah to

proclaim John the Baptist's birth. Now it's her turn. Gabriel greets her with, "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*" Some translations record it as "Greetings, O one full of grace," which led some people to erroneously conclude that Mary was a source of grace in addition to Jesus, but "favored one," is closer to the original Greek. God simply chose to bless this faithful woman, not because she earned anything, but because she was chosen by Him.

So, Gabriel tells Mary not to be afraid. It's easy to say, but reality is quite different. If I was Mary, I'd be a little concerned myself. Life was cheap back then and any form of indiscretion by a young, betrothed woman could have severe consequences. Despite this Mary has the faith to listen. Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant, and her child shall be named, *Ye'shua* in Aramaic, or *Yehoshua* in Hebrew, meaning "God Saves." Gabriel goes on to say that her child will be great and will be called "the Son of the Most High," clear indication that Mary's child will be the promised Messiah.

Mary's response here is just as important as what she was just told. We're not sure how much Mary understood of Gabriel's message, but she must have understood on some level and knew it had some significance. Her family was very religious and so she likely had a basic understanding of the Old Testament. Jews were one of few ancient cultures that educated both boys and girls on a basic level. Yes, certain boys received higher levels of education, but everyone was educated on the basics. So, instead of running away or calling for help, Mary asks, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Mary may not have earned a PhD, but she was intelligent enough and educated enough to know a few things about human biology and also Yahweh's commandments about purity. Gabriel tells her that the Holy Spirit will impregnate her, thus the child will be Holy as it was not conceived in the usual manner. Gabriel then responds with "*Nothing will be impossible with God.*"

Here is where Mary goes "all in" with her faith. She knows what could happen to her when her pregnancy is discovered by the community. Nazareth is a small town, and everyone knows everybody's business. There is no hiding in a small town. Her very life is in danger, not just her reputation and the reputation of her family. To make her response a little easier, Gabriel tells her that her cousin Elizabeth, who lives in Bethany is pregnant too. Proof that Mary can verify, although it's about a three-day journey. As Mary was processing all of this, she must have asked herself, "With all of this on the line, do I trust this angel (and ultimately

Yahweh)?" because she answered, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." What a courageous statement of faith!

Most of us have never been in positions like Mary when we have risked our very lives to live out our faith. I can only imagine what courage Mary must have gone through, aside from the tidbits revealed in Scripture. I do know of some of our retired military members who have brought their bibles with them as they traveled to Muslim-Majority countries. While there would have been a severe penalty if they were caught, this is the closest modern-day equivalent I can think of, other than former Muslims leaving Islam. The penalty for leaving Islam is death. But we don't do that here, right? While most western former Muslims don't face an immediate threat of death, as long as they don't travel to a Muslim-majority country, many lose their friends, family, and the only community they've ever known.

So, while most of us never have or will be placed in a similar situation as Mary or our new brothers and sisters who left Islam for Jesus, Jesus still gives us the opportunity to go "all in" with our faith. Last week we took a huge leap of faith when we issued a call to Pastor Greg Strand. He and his family will also be taking a leap of faith as they ponder the call. We also went "all in" when we started the school and when we built the community center.

We go "all in" when we make a commitment to our faith. Maybe it's serving as a care warrior, maybe it's serving on the church council or helping with VBS. Maybe it's visiting a friend or family member who's in need, instead of watching TV or surfing the Internet. We all go "all-in" in different ways, but we have one thing in common, your faith will be strengthened, and you will learn what it's like to be a Christian on a whole new level.

CeeLo Green has released a wonderful song around Christmas a few years ago called, "Mary did you know?" This deeply reflective song that poses the question if Mary knew all of what Jesus would do. I think in some ways, she did, on some level. She knew Jesus would do something for the wedding at Cana. She was essentially told that her child would be the promised Messiah. Then she frantically searches for the 12-year-old Jesus, and then the family rejects Jesus in Nazareth, so Mary had her stumbles in faith too, but she always came back to Jesus. She knew that when she didn't have all the answers or details, she could turn to her Son. Good advice that we can take to heart, too.

Mary knew the Old Testament. She knew the promises of God and she was faithful to those promises, but I'm sure that faith paled in comparison to the faith she had after she

carried Jesus in her womb. Did she still stumble in her faith? Sure, as Luke records later in Chapter 4, but that struggle was short-lived as she would spend her life following Jesus during his earthly ministry and was by her Son's side when He went to the Cross to pay for her sins and the sins of everyone else. She stood by her Son as he gave up his spirit saying, "It is finished."

So now is the opportunity to double-down on your faith. We have opportunities to bless others in need, just as Jesus has first blessed us. There are people suffering due to the pandemic and its restrictions. There is usually a seasonal bump in depression due to the lack of light and the harsh weather. Covid-19 is exacerbating that. So be that light in this dark world. All it takes is a phone call, email, Skype, or video chat from you to bring light into a dark world. We saw this in the Spring. I'm still in awe and quite humbled on how much those online services meant to you. Now it's your turn. How will you bring light into the darkness?

In Jesus name,

Amen.

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Quotations from Scripture come from:

Various Authors. *The Lutheran Study Bible*. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.