

“Mary’s Faith”
Luke 1:26-56
December 24, 2023
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we set aside our series in Deuteronomy to focus on the theme of Christmas, as we look at Mary, and how she responds to the annunciation that she will give birth to Christ.

With that in mind, let’s turn now to our text: Luke 1:26-56.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Luke writes:

^{1:26}In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴²and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”
⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,
and our chief counselors.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

Introduction

This morning, as we consider Mary and her response to the annunciation, I want to especially focus on Mary’s faith. Because I think it’s Mary’s faith that Luke is especially holding out for us to consider here.

Remember, Luke, who wrote this gospel, wrote with goals in mind. First, as he explained in the opening words of his gospel, he wanted to compile an accurate narrative of what had happened, with information gathered from eyewitnesses. Luke wanted to set down the facts about Jesus Christ. [Luke 1:1-4]

But then, along with that, Luke also wanted to help people know how to respond to those facts. He wrote so that his readers would know how to respond to the good news of Jesus Christ with true and confident faith [Luke 1:4]

And so Luke is careful to get his facts straight here. But he also, in what he chooses to record, sets forth certain examples for us. And Mary is one of them – she is described here as a model for Christian faith. And so Luke spends a good deal of his account here depicting how Mary’s faith played out, so that we can see it, reflect on it, and imitate it.

And as we consider Mary’s faith here, I want to note three things about it.

Mary’s faith, in these verses is:

- A faith with thoughtful engagement.
- It is a faith without full comprehension.
- And it is a faith grounded in relational trust.

So: It’s a faith with thoughtful engagement, a faith without full comprehension, and a faith grounded in relational trust.

Let’s consider each of those traits now in more depth. And as we do, I’ll be especially drawing from Tim Keller’s writing on this text this morning.

Faith with Thoughtful Engagement

So first, what we see in Mary is faith with thoughtful engagement.

And right off the bat that should tell us that we are dealing with a different kind of faith than the thin, sentimentalized version of faith that is so often held up in our culture during this season.

Around Christmas, our culture is full of stories, and movies, and songs about belief in the fantastical, even when it’s contrary to reason. There are countless songs and stories about the virtues of belief in the magical without thoughtfully engaging with questions or concerns about whether or not it’s really true.

And often – maybe unthinkingly – we tend to project that kind of faith onto ancient people. We can think of ancient people as pretty stupid and easily fooled. For every unexpected blessing they create a new god to worship. For every creak in the woods they come up with a new spirit to fear.

Now, it’s true that people in the ancient world – like people in many traditional cultures today – had a more robust view of the spiritual realm and its possibilities than we do in our highly secular culture. But all the same, such ancient people were not stupid.

And that reality is seen right here in our text, as Mary thoughtfully engages with what’s put before her.

In verses 26 through 28, an angel appears to Mary. In verse 29 we get her initial response. And we should note that it's not a superficial or nonchalant response. She doesn't just say "Oh ... an angel ... okay!" She also doesn't just go along with it without question or confusion. Mary, we read in verse 29 "w

as greatly troubled [...] and tried to discern" the meaning of what was happening and being said to her. As Tim Keller points out, one of the Greek words used there means, in a sense "to make an audit." Mary is auditing what's happening here – she's trying to figure out how it all adds up, what's going on. [Keller, 81] This isn't the thoughtless engagement of the main character in a Netflix Christmas special when she's confronted with a magical Christmas Walrus whose come to take her to the North Pole. Mary is different. She's puzzled – she's troubled – she's trying to sort out what's going on here. She has an angel speaking to her, and her first response is thoughtful engagement, discernment, and auditing the words spoken to her.

And that approach continues. When she's told that she will give birth to a son who will be great, her response is "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Again, we can have a tendency to treat ancient people as if they don't know how the world works, and so they're just ready to accept the idea of miracles left and right. But they often had a much more grounded and concrete understanding of the world than you or I do. A typical young woman who is Mary's age in our culture understands why a virgin can't give birth because someone's explained it to her, or she's read about it in a book. A young woman in Mary's culture was surrounded by livestock, in a world where breeding animals was part of life. She knew what was required for sheep to make more sheep and cows to make more cows ... in a far more concrete way than many of us do. We may know more about the cellular biology of it all ... but even that, for most of us, is completely theoretical and taken by faith – we read a book with illustrations about it that someone drew for us. But the life of a person in the ancient world often revolved around animal breeding, and everyone knew a female sheep, left alone, was never going to give you a new lamb. Mary was not an idiot who was unaware of the ways of the world.

An angel tells her that she will have a baby, and she is thoughtfully engaging with the parts of that statement that don't make sense to her.

And in that, Mary serves as an example for us.

Our culture often likes to act as if faith is contrary to reason – as if faith is all about our emotions and requires us to check our brains at the door. Our culture may call for that ... but the Bible doesn't. The Bible calls for faith with thoughtful engagement, and we see with Mary.

So it's worth asking yourself ... how do you handle questions or confusion about the Christian faith?

When you have questions, confusion, or doubts, how do you handle it? Do you just try to willfully shove them aside and ignore them and hope they'll go away? Or do you thoughtfully engage with your faith on those issues, as Mary does here – asking questions, and making an audit of what you are to believe?

Or how do you handle it when other people – especially other Christians – raise their questions or concerns or doubts about Christianity with you – whether a friend, someone you’re discipling, a spouse, a child, or someone else? Do you try to just stifle their questions? Do you try to give a pat answer and get them to move on as quickly as possible? Or do you encourage them, like Mary, to press into those questions and thoughtfully engage with them?

And if you’re hesitant or nervous to dig into those questions about Christianity ... why do you think that is?

I think that hesitancy often reveals something about our confidence level in our faith.

It makes me think about instant replay. Slow motion instant replay is a way to dig deeper into what happened – to answer questions about it, to take an audit of every detail of it.

Which is why slow-motion instant replay is great for things that are real ... but really disappointing for things that are an illusion.

Having slow-motion instant replay from every angle would absolutely destroy the wonder at a magic show. If you went to a magic show, and the magician performed an illusion, and you exclaimed “How did he do that???” and then, you got to spend the next five minutes rewatching the trick from every angle, in slow motion ... it would, in the end, absolutely kill the magic and the wonder. Because it’s an illusion. And at full speed, from a distance, whatever the magician did might seem amazing. But we all know that if we look too closely – if we look up-close and watch slowly – if we take an audit of everything he did – then eventually we’ll unmask the deception, and see the illusion for what it is: a slight of hand, rather than true magic. You can’t press an illusion too closely, and we know it. Slow-motion instant replay would destroy a magic show.

But now think of the effects of slow-motion instant replay on a sporting event. The quarterback drops back, he launches the ball, and the wide receiver, surrounded by defenders in the corner of the end zone somehow manages to get an arm above them, catch it with one hand, and get both feet on the ground before tumbling out of bounds for a touchdown. And we exclaim “How did he do that???” And as if they knew that we had asked that question, the TV producers broadcasting the game then proceed to show the play over and over again, in slow motion, from more camera angles than we believed was even possible. And they zoom in on every detail. They make careful audit of every single thing that football player did – with his hands, his feet, his body ... and far from reducing the magic of the play, it increases it ... it grows our wonder ... because the thing that happened is real. And so a careful audit of it makes it all the more amazing to us.

When something is real ... a closer inspection ... an intelligent audit ... thoughtful engagement ... doesn’t threaten our wonder ... but it should increase it.

And so it is with the Christian faith.

When we ignore, or push aside, or try to stifle our questions, concerns, or doubts about the Christian faith ... then we’re treating it like it’s an illusion – like it’s a magic show – like it’s a

story about a magical Christmas walrus from the North Pole. “Don’t look too close, or it will all fall apart.” That is the thin faith given to an illusion that we want to believe ... but suspect, deep down, is a lie.

And it’s not the kind of faith the Bible calls us to. The Bible calls us to faith with thoughtful engagement. Because the Bible’s story is real ... and not wishful thinking. And reality can stand up under an audit. Reality can stand up under scrutiny. Reality welcomes slow-motion instant replay.

And so when Mary sees an angel, she is thinking, she’s discerning, she’s asking questions – because that is a good way to engage reality – even miraculous reality.

But the sincerity behind such questions does matter.

A sincere question is honestly looking for the truth. But a dismissive question is ready to reject whatever it’s told. And Luke draws this point out at the beginning of his gospel.

Because before the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he appeared to Zechariah, to tell him about another unexpected birth. But that conversation did not go as well. Zechariah also asked questions. But his question was less sincere. It was more like a dismissal than an honest inquiry. And so where Mary here is praised, Zechariah there was scolded. And that should cause us to consider how we ask questions about our faith – how we engage with our doubts or struggles.

Tim Keller puts it like this – he writes: “There is a kind of doubt that is a sign of a closed mind, and there is a kind of doubt that is the sign of an open mind. Some doubt seeks answers, and some doubt is a defense against the possibility of answers. There are people like Mary who are open to the truth and are willing to relinquish sovereignty over their lives if they can be shown that the truth is other than what they thought. And there are those like Zechariah who use doubts as a way of staying in control of their lives and keeping their minds closed. Which kind of doubt do you have?” [Keller, 83]

The Bible calls us to voice our honest doubts and questions ... because the Bible can withstand such inquiry. But questions need to be sincere. If they’re not, then we’re not really thoughtfully engaging.

Christians have been asking questions like Mary’s for centuries – for millennia. Whatever your questions are, I assure you, Christians have probably wrestled with them before. You can dig into what they’ve thought and what they’ve found in the Scriptures. The Bible does not call us to set aside our sincere questions or confusions. It calls us, rather, to faith with thoughtful engagement.

That’s what we should pursue ourselves. It’s what we should encourage our children to pursue. It’s what we should encourage one another to pursue.

And it’s the first thing we see here in the example of Mary.

Faith without Full Comprehension

But the second thing we see introduces some tension to all that.

First, we said that the Bible calls us to faith with thoughtful engagement.

But then second, the Bible also calls us to faith without full comprehension.

Now ... what do I mean by that?

Mary asks a question here. And Mary gets an answer. But it would be absurd to say that at the end of it all, Mary has fully understood the situation – whether it's what God is doing, or why he's called her to play this role in the world.

Mary asks in verse 34 “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And verse 35 is an answer. But even after she gets that answer ... she doesn't fully comprehend what the Lord will do. Christian theologians still ponder over the exact biological and miraculous actions the Lord took in Mary's womb. Mary is asked here to trust the Lord's work, without fully comprehending it.

And at the same time, Mary is also expected here to trust the Lord's calling on her ... and to reorder her life accordingly, without fully understanding why. She knows she's been chosen by God. She ponders and audits the angel's words. But she doesn't really understand why the Lord has chosen her. She doesn't understand why this has to happen before she's married. She doesn't comprehend why the Messiah must come from a virgin birth. She doesn't understand why her life and her plans need to be turned upside down.

In both what she is to believe, and what she is to do, Mary is called to faith without full comprehension.

And we tend to think of that as a posture that's unique to religious faith. But it's not really. It's actually pretty common in a number of areas of life.

Multiple times in my life, I have placed my trust in physics enough to allow myself to be placed in a chair, in a metal tube, flying over 30,000 feet up in the air. Now ... I know things about physics ... I took AP physics in high school, I remember the diagrams of how airplane wings work and all that ... but let's be honest ... I don't really fully understand or comprehend how an airplane really works. I know some things about it. But I don't understand it fully. And yet I trust it with my life. I trust that I won't fall 30,000 feet to my death. I entrust myself to the airplane even though I don't fully comprehend how it works.

And yet ... when it comes to the God of the Bible ... we can feel like we're being asked to do something extraordinary if we entrust ourselves to him without fully wrapping our head around the answer to every question we may have about him: about his being, about his Triune nature, about how he could allow evil into the world, about how he designed both human freedom and his own sovereignty, and so on.

And yet ... if an airplane can be both trustworthy ... and too complex for most of us to fully understand ... then surely the God who made the universe can be both trustworthy and too complex for us to fully understand.

When we thoughtfully engage with the God of the Bible, there is a lot we can learn and know about him ... but we should not expect that we will fully understand him. Not even close.

And with that ... we may not always fully understand what he calls us to do or how he calls us to live.

Mary exemplifies that too. She accepts here a dramatic calling on her life, even though she doesn't fully comprehend why God would ask her to do this: Why he would ask here to carry a baby, from the Holy Spirit, before she was married. There's no way she fully understood it. And yet she accepted the Lord's calling.

And in a similar way, we should not be surprised when the God who made us, the God of the universe, the God of the Bible, calls us to live in ways that we struggle to fully understand. We can ask questions about it – as Mary does – and we can inquire more deeply about it. But that doesn't mean that we'll fully understand the commands God gives us and why he gives them to us.

And again, this kind of calling – to obey a command without fully understanding its basis – is not as unique to the religious realm of life as we often tend to think.

A year ago or so, my doctor told me that I should make some changes to how I eat and how I live in order to lower my cholesterol a bit. There was nothing alarming in my test results ... but things were in a place where it would be good to try to reduce my cholesterol levels a bit. So my doctor called on me to make some significant lifestyle changes towards that end. He stressed that making those changes would be important to my long-term future – even to how long I will live. So it's kind of a big deal.

But here's the thing ... brothers and sisters, I still don't understand what a cholesterol is. I mean ... I can look at the chemical diagrams ... and I can look at the pictures of arteries that are clogged ... but at the end of the day ... I don't understand the problem that well. But I can't wait until I fully understand it all at a cellular and chemical level before I start taking my doctor's advice seriously. I should ask questions, and I should be thoughtfully engaged with the range of views on the best ways to be healthy, but I need to start following the commands and exhortations of others long before I fully understand it all in minute details. I need to follow the call of my doctor ... even though I may not fully understand all the chemical and cellular reasons behind it all.

In fact, it even goes beyond that. Because when it comes to basic things even, like how I should eat from day to day, it's not just that I should follow commands that I don't fully understand ... it's that I should follow commands that, at a heart-level, are downright counterintuitive to me.

When it comes to food, my heart tells me that what I most need is to eat more pizza ... and pasta ... and mozzarella cheese. My heart urges me that that is what is best for me, that that is what will

lead to happiness and lifelong flourishing for me. But my heart is wrong. I cannot trust my heart to tell me what is best for my body ... so why on earth do we think we can trust our hearts to tell us what is best for our souls?

Mary's heart, in that moment ... as she faced the strangeness, the risks, the dangers, the possible losses of the Lord's calling on her – in that moment, her heart probably told her to flee the Lord's calling. And so we shouldn't be shocked if we, at times, feel the same way about the Lord's calling or commands in our lives ... just as we might feel that desire to flee from a doctor's directions for our health.

The truth doesn't always make sense to us. The truth doesn't always feel most appealing to us in the moment. The truth, even when we know it, is often beyond our full understanding.

And so even as we seek to have faith with thoughtful engagement, we shouldn't expect our faith to lead to full understanding.

Instead our faith will call us to personal trust in the wisdom and care of another.

Which brings us to our third and final point ...

Faith Grounded in Relational Trust

The faith we see here in Mary is faith that is grounded in relational trust.

Mary here remembers who she is, and who God is. And with that in mind, she places her trust in the Lord.

That's what's going on in verse 38. There she remembers the goodness of the God she serves, and she entrusts herself to him. And that comes out even more clearly a few verses later – in verses 46 through 55, where she praises God for who he is and what he has done. Her trust in him is a relational trust – it's trust in the Lord as a person.

At the end of the day, Christian faith is not faith in a concept or a philosophy. It's not ultimately faith in a claim or a thing. It's faith in a person. It's faith in God himself.

It's relational faith. And relational faith can increase and grow both in its strength and its understanding as the relationship continues.

As we see her portrayed throughout the gospels and into the book of Acts, we see how Mary's faith grew and developed and deepened. But an anchor to all that was the truth at the center of Christmas: That the God of the Bible loves his people enough to come to them ... that the God of the Bible loves his people so much that he himself would come in the flesh, in the form of a baby, to be with them, and to save them.

That's the relationship he has with them. That's how much he loves them.

But it's not just an abstract concept ... it's more particular than that. What shaped Mary's life was the realization that God loved her so much that he would come to earth in the flesh to know her, and to save her.

And the same is true for you and me. If Christian faith is fundamentally relational faith, then at its heart is the kind of relationship the Lord is seeking with us. And every year at Christmas we remember that it is a relationship where he seeks us, where he draws close to us, where he comes to earth even as a tiny baby, all so that he might know us, save us, and be with us forever. That is how great his love is. And knowing that he has done that for us should lead us to trust him and love him.

But even when we know those things ... we may need help making it sink in.

And actually, I think we see something of that here in our text.

Mary, remember, is visited by an angel from heaven. And he tells her all she needs to know about what is about to happen, and about the Lord's love in drawing close to her. But, interestingly, it's not until she gets together with Elizabeth that that truth really seems to hit home, and she breaks forth with the Magnificat – this song that's recorded in verses 46 through 55. [Keller, 86]

When Mary meets with Elizabeth, Elizabeth, in verses 42 through 45 doesn't provide any new information to Mary. Elizabeth doesn't add any facts to what Gabriel told her. John the Baptist, in the womb, leaps for joy – but that's not really new information about God either. Mary knew nothing more after verse 45 than she knew after verse 37. And yet, it's after verse 45 ... it's after a community of believers have joined her in rejoicing, and believing in what the Lord has done and is doing – it's after that experience of Christian community that Mary is able to burst into song.

And so the first way that Luke shows us that Mary's relational faith in the Lord grows, is through Christian community.

And the same is true for us. To grow in our relational faith with God – to grow in our trust of God and our knowledge of God ... we often need other believers to come alongside us. And as they do, they may not say anything we don't already know. And yet, all the same, by being with them, our faith is strengthened.

Which is why we need to gather together for worship. It's why we need the church community. It's why we need Christian friendships. Our relational faith in God grows in the presence of other believers. That's the first thing Luke shows us about the growth of our faith.

The second thing he shows us about growing our faith, is that such growth also comes through Scripture. Mary's song, in verses 46 through 55 is rich with Scripture. It's filled with Old Testament concepts, images, allusions and promises. [Meyers, *Theopolis* Episode 285, 12:00ff] As one commentator puts it, her song "is a virtual collage of biblical texts." [Green, 101] Mary, remember, has met, and spoken with, an angel. But it's through connecting that experience with

the Word of God that her faith grows deeper here – as she connects the words of Scripture to her own life and experience.

And in the same way, for us, it's through engaging with the Scriptures, and wrestling with how they apply to our lives that we grow in our relationship with God and faith in him. We need to be engaged with the Bible if we want to trust God more firmly, and know him more deeply.

And so the third thing we see here is that Christian faith is relational faith. And it grows and is strengthened as we engage with God's Word and God's people.

Conclusion

Christmas is a time where we hear a lot of stories. And we also often hear a lot of vague exhortations to faith.

But at the heart of Christmas in the Bible lies a specific kind of faith. It's not a thin or blind faith ... but a faith with thoughtful engagement – asking questions and pressing to know the truth.

It's not a faith that expects to master its subject ... but rather a faith that seeks to know the One who will Master us.

And it's not a faith in a cold concept, an impersonal force, or an abstract philosophy. It's a relational trust, in a personal God, who loved us so much, that he came to dwell among us, as one of us ... born a small child, that he might bear our burdens and draw us to himself.

That is biblical Christmas faith.

That is the faith of Mary, that we see here in our text.

That is the faith of the mother of our Lord.

May it be our faith as well.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Keller, Timothy. *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2016.

Theopolis Podcast. Episode 285: “The Annunciation of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38).” With Peter Leithart, Alastair Roberts, and Jeff Meyers. November 27, 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-285-the-annunciation-of-jesus-luke-126-38-with-leithart-roberts-meyers>

Theopolis Podcast. Episode 285: “Mary, Elizabeth, and the Magnificat (Luke 1:39-56)” With Peter Leithart, Alastair Roberts, and Jeff Meyers. December 4, 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-287-mary-elizabeth-and-the-magnificat-luke-139-56-with-leithart-roberts-meyers>

Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.