

# God Invites Our Participation

A sermon in the 2020 Advent Sermon Series “Christmas Basics”

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- Isaiah 7:14-15 Good News Translation <sup>14</sup> Well then, the Lord himself will give you a sign: a young woman who is pregnant will have a son and will name him ‘Immanuel.’ <sup>15</sup> By the time he is old enough to make his own decisions, people will be drinking milk and eating honey.
- Luke 1:26-38 Good News Translation <sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. <sup>27</sup> He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel came to her and said, “Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!”  
<sup>29</sup> Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, “Don't be afraid, Mary; [you have found favor with God<sup>1</sup>]. <sup>31</sup> You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, <sup>33</sup> and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!”  
<sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, “I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?”  
<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. <sup>37</sup> For there is nothing that God cannot do.”  
<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord's servant,” said Mary; “may it happen to me as you have said.” And the angel left her.

I dare say that your experience of Christmas this year has already been different from any other year in your life. Maybe you've found yourself spending less time in stores and shops, or you're not holding family gatherings or attending holiday parties, or you've scaled back on decorations and mailing lists and holiday attire. And of course, the familiar and beloved tradition of being in church at Christmastime with friends and loved ones and strangers... it is so saddening that public gatherings – even for worship – are simply unwise as long as this once-in-a-lifetime viral threat is among us.

But during this year's Advent season I've suggested that we use this scaled-back Christmas observance to reflect on “Christmas Basics.” Beneath Christmas' elaborate decorations and excessive gift-giving and inordinate caloric consumption, what are the basic messages we should take from Christmas, and what messages should we share because of Christmas?

On this last Sunday of Advent let's look to Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version translation; original Good News translation: “God has been gracious to you.”

Have you ever wondered “Why did God choose Mary?” Of all people – and God could certainly choose anyone God wanted – of all people, why did God select her to be the human instrument through which God’s love would enter the realm of human activity? Why was Mary the one?

She’s famous now, of course – we remember her indispensable role at Christmastime every year. But how did she deserve being selected by God for this incomparable role?

It’s not because she came from a prominent family because she didn’t. She didn’t have insider access to the movers and shakers of society.

Nor was she from a strategic location which offered a particular benefit to God’s plan. You know the way some people today think that anything of importance must be in either New York and Los Angeles? From that viewpoint Mary would be from small-town Nebraska. She was living in Nazareth in the Galilee region of northern Palestine. Nazareth today is a medium-sized city bustling with light industry and business. But back then Nazareth was a village of perhaps 100 people, some of whom lived in caves rather than houses.<sup>2</sup> Not at all a place of strategic importance for God to successfully launch this plan of incarnation.

Nor was Mary chosen because she was a wise, influential figure in her community. She wasn’t experienced in the social or political dynamics of her day. Through the custom of that time and place, Mary had been promised in a marriage contract to a family whose adult son Joseph was a carpenter. Based on the usual practice, that meant that Mary was most likely a girl in her early ‘teens. In a year or two the marriage would be finalized and she would leave her home to move in with Joseph’s family. Brides didn’t have any say in the matter. No, God didn’t choose Mary because she was an important, influential person.

So... why Mary?

In this announcement story the angel gave her the reason: Gabriel said, “You have found favor with God.” *She found favor with God?* What was there about Mary that caused her to find such powerful approval in the eyes of God? The answer is found at the end of the story.

After the angel announced her destiny as the mother to give birth to the One who will be called the Son of the Most High God... and after Mary asked, “How is this possible, since my marriage is not yet complete?” ... and after the angel Gabriel revealed God’s plan to conceive by the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit... after hearing and

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 288.

processing this whole plan in matter of a brief moment, Mary's response was simply this: "I am the Lord's servant."

"I am the Lord's servant."

Mary offered herself to serve God's will. No preconditions. No "When it's convenient." No "Well, I'd be willing to do *this* much..." No "What's in this for me?"

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said."

Think of it: "...the glory of Christmas came about by the willingness of ordinary people to obey God's claim on their lives."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe you never thought of yourself as on the same level as Mary the mother of Jesus. But with all respect I say to you that you, too, are an ordinary person, just like Mary. Not from a famous, influential family. Not from the halls of power. An ordinary person.

And yet you're God's creation. God has every right to claim your time and energy and creativity and devotion. God has created you, and God claims you. What remains to be seen is, "Will you obey?" Will you obey God's claim on your life as freely as Mary did?

One of the teachings of the Christian church is that we believe Jesus was, at the same time, fully God and fully human – it's a holy mystery that we cannot explain. Because Jesus was fully human, he would know what it is to be reluctant to face difficult situations. But Jesus carried out his ministry fully aware that it would lead him to confrontation with the powers of the realm; his obedience would lead him to face ridicule, even hatred; his obedience would lead him to rejection and pain and death. Despite all that, Jesus remained faithful to God's plan for his life.

And can't we imagine that Jesus learned that obedience from his mother? For as we heard, she was the one who told the angel Gabriel, "I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said."

At Christmas God not only comes into our world; God seeks to come into our lives. In the hearts of people the world over, God want to plant and grow mercy, peace, forgiveness, love. God seeks willing, obedient servants to participate in this divine work among humankind. Long ago, a devout, faithful young woman in Nazareth set an example when she offered herself to God's service saying, "I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said."

May God give us a spirit of faithful obedience, so that we, too, will respond to God, "I am the Lord's servant; may my words and actions fulfill your will, God."

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<sup>3</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 53