

Four Ways we should be like Mary.

A sermon preached at Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab .

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B. December 18, 2005. (Text: Luke 1:26-38)

In the busy Israeli Arab city of Nazareth today there's a vast, modern Roman Catholic church – the Basilica of the Annunciation. You can see it from miles away because its dome dominates the skyline of the town. The basilica, built in 1969, is built over the site that ancient tradition says was the home of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Some distance away is another, older church – the Orthodox Church of St. Gabriel, built in the 18th century. It is quite small and not too impressive. It's built over a well, fed by a spring whose waters bubble up into a natural trough in the rock. According to local legend, it was here – when she came to draw water – that the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah.

For those who visit it, this little church, with its grotto enclosing the ancient water supply of Nazareth, can capture the imagination better than the big, modern church up the hill. We can envision the spring there among the rocks, feeding its water into the well as it did 2000 years ago, on the edge of the little village, and a well-worn trail leads down to it.

We can imagine Mary coming down the trail to the well not long after sunrise, probably barefoot. Other women would be there on the same mission. She would dip her jar into the pool by its cord and then draw it up. If time permitted, maybe she stopped for a while and sat on one of the boulders nearby, just to enjoy a moment of quiet in the sunshine of early morning after the other women had gone on their way. I like to think that it was then that she was visited by the angel who told her what we heard in today's gospel, that she was chosen to be the mother of the Son of God —to be the one that Greek call “the God-bearer.”

It really doesn't matter how we re-create the scene in our minds, or dramatize the story that Luke gives us. What *does* matter for Christians is that the Bible offers Mary as a model for our own relationship with God. You see, there's a sense in which we can think of Mary as the *first disciple*, the first person to believe that Jesus was the Son of God and Savior of the world.

These verses weren't in today's gospel, but just a little further on in the same chapter it says that when Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth (soon to be the mother of John the Baptist), Elizabeth said about her, “*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*” Mary was a *believer*.

In the gospel account of the Annunciation, I see four characteristics of Mary that we might take as goals for our own discipleship.

First: She was listening for God's word. Wherever she was, in fact, when the angel came to her – whether sitting for a moment beside the well in the cool of the early morning, or out in the busy village market buying vegetables, or folding clean clothes by lamplight before going to bed, I believe Mary was *listening to God* with heart and mind. Angels are messengers of God, and the messages of angels don't usually come with a flourish of trumpets. Their announcements are not necessarily proclaimed loudly. Some of God's most important communications to humanity have come in whispers or even in dreams ...and these words might have been missed by one who wasn't listening. But Mary was *listening*. Of course, the message that came to her was unexpected. It was surprising, even shocking. But she didn't seem to doubt for a moment that it was from God.

I believe that one reason why Mary “*found favor with God*” (as the gospel says) is because she spent her prayer time *not* telling God what she wanted, but asking him to tell her what *he* wanted from her. She was a *listener*.

The *second* thing about Mary which we might take as a goal for our own discipleship is this: **Mary was honest with God about herself.** She was afraid. She was perplexed. And she didn't pretend to be

otherwise. She didn't hesitate to say to the angel, "*How can this be?*" Mary was formally engaged to Joseph. But, in careful obedience to the Law, she was still a virgin, living at home with her parents until the formal wedding celebration. So she asked the angel: *How can this be?*

We don't doubt that God knows our secrets, even if we fail to tell him. He is (as we say) the One "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." But spiritual integrity for a Christian demands that we consciously open our hearts to God—owning before God all the realities of our thoughts and emotions, the good and the bad alike, including our fears, our frustrations, our questions, and our doubts. The Lord works with power in our lives when we offer him absolute honesty, when we have no illusions about ourselves.

The *third* aspect of Mary's relationship to God that we can see as a model for ourselves is: **She believed God's Word.** As her cousin Elizabeth said, "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*" A woman who believes that she is going to have a baby even though she has had no contact with a man is a *believer!*

As far as Mary was concerned, God was quite able to fulfill his promise. She did not doubt that. His word was enough for her. Believing God is what we do when we trust Christ for salvation, for our eternal security, rather than assuming we have to find some other path by using our own creative intelligence.

The *fourth* and most significant thing about Mary which we can take as a pattern is: **Mary was submitted to God.** She was yielded to God's will for her life, even though she didn't understand it. Her answer to the angel's announcement was very simple, direct and humble: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" The word "servant" in our English version is a concession to modern taste. The actual word is "slave." She said, "*I am the slave of the Lord.*" A slave has no private will that counts for anything; only the will of the master matters.

And here's something that I think is important. God did not *force his will* on Mary. To use a current expression, we would say God respected Mary's "right to choose." I think that once she had heard what the angel had to say, Mary could have folded her arms and said, "No. This is not for me. You must find another woman. I can't do it." And if she had said that, God would have found someone else. —But, of course, before he sent Gabriel to her, the Lord knew Mary's heart. She had already "found favor with God."

Mary said, "*Let it be with me according to your word.*" Those words of his mother, spoken when he was conceived, find an echo in Jesus' own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he went to the cross: "*Not my will, but yours be done.*"

If we *listen* for God's word to us; if we *believe* that word; if we are *honest with God* and with ourselves; then we need to follow through by *yielding* to God—let's call it *making ourselves available to God*, as young Mary did— if we are to experience the fruit of God's presence in our lives.

When Mary said her "yes" to God, "*let it be with me according to your word*", she had no idea what the future would be, either for herself or for her Son. All she knew was that God had chosen her to be his partner in bringing God's own life into the world in a unique, yet paradoxically very ordinary way. God's grace, God's favor had been granted her ...for a purpose. And Mary said "yes" to God without asking what such cooperation might ultimately cost her. She simply said, "*I am your servant, Lord, your slave. Let your will be done.*"

Greek Orthodox Christians call Mary the *Theotokos*, the "God-bearer." God summons us to be like her, to be "God-bearers" ourselves, partners with him who — in our *listening for his word*, in our *believing his promises*, in our *being honest with him* about ourselves and our own fears, and in our *obeying him in humble submission* — allow God's own life to be formed in us and "take flesh" from our flesh... just as Jesus "took" his flesh from a young woman who believed what had been spoken to her by God.