***MARY: WHY ME?***

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Texts: Luke 1:26-38 and John 19:16b-30

 Over these past several weeks we have met a handful of leaders from our ancestors in faith in this series of summer sermons; some of those leaders were blessed with great leadership skills while others seemed ill-prepared and unlikely choices. The persistent question has been: Why me? Why does God choose whom God chooses? It is a question that may have arisen in the minds of those leaders as well as those of us who hear their stories.

 Why Noah? Because he was a righteous man.

 Why Moses? Because God doesn’t accept excuses, and says “I am with you and that is enough.”

 Why Abraham and Sarah? Because old age is not a disqualifier.

 Why Timothy? Because youth is not a disqualifier either.

 Why David? Because God works through even sinfully flawed people. Why Peter? Because God works through even those who don’t get it right all the time.

There are a host of others whose call we might consider – Gideon who tested God repeatedly, Jonah who tried to run away, Samuel who didn’t recognize God’s voice. But of all those who might have wondered, “Why me?” perhaps the one who most deserves to ask that question is Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Gospel lessons we read this morning are the bookends of her life as the mother of the Messiah, and at both times – at the very beginning and near the very end – she might well have pondered in her heart, why me?

 In the familiar words of Luke that we are accustomed to hearing in a colder season of the year, the angel Gabriel appears to a young and bewildered virgin named Mary, saying: “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” It is a curious greeting for a poor young Jewish woman living under Roman rule. The Lord seemed no more *with her* than with any other Jew, all of whom had come to wonder whether God was with any of them anymore. It had been a long time since any prophet had spoken a word from the Lord, a longer time since any king had sat on the throne of David, a long time in which the Lord seemed strangely silent in their midst. *How long, O Lord! How long until you deliver your people!* were not just words of the psalmist but words of the people who longed for the Messiah to come. If the Lord was with them, it was hard to discern how the Lord was with them in their day to day struggles.

 So, one might imagine that Mary was pretty sure the angel Gabriel had the wrong address and wrong person when he appeared, that some other Favored One was intended for his message. But then Gabriel called her by name: *Mary*. Thirty-four years later Jesus will call another Mary by name after his resurrection, and only then will she recognize him. By speaking her name Gabriel helps Mary recognize that his message is indeed for her. It is good news, tidings-of-great-joy-for-all-people kind of news:

 *You will become pregnant and bear a son; he will be great and*

 *will be called Son of the Most High, and he shall reign forever and ever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

Mary was the Favored One because God had chosen her to bear the Son of God. As unlikely as it might be, God had chosen her. As daunting as that might be, she would not face that challenge alone; the Lord would be with her – and as with Moses, that would be enough!

 The words of the angel sound like good news to us, but do you really think it sounded like good news to Mary, a poor unmarried young woman who had yet to sleep with a man? Does that news sound possible, given the reality of human biology – even if the news comes from the mouth of an angel? Mary is bold enough to raise that question with the angel: *How can this be?* How can what the angel says possibly be true? The angel replies that the Holy Spirit will make it happen and cites as proof the miraculous pregnancy of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. An old woman can conceive a child, and so can a young virgin, for *with God nothing is impossible.* The Elizabeth example must have been pretty convincing proof, for Mary then believes the words of the angel and offers herself as God’s servant; she does so with the assurance that God is with her, for with God even this seeming impossibility is possible. Martin Luther says,

 *There are three wonders here*.  *One, that God should become man; another, that a virgin should bear a child; and, the third, that Mary believed. And the greatest of these is that Mary believed.*

Two thousand years later it is still a wonder that Mary believed and that we believe, still a wonder that faith burns bright across the centuries, still a wonder that we gather here on a hot summer day to recall those words of the angel spoken to young Mary. We have no angel appearing before us, but we have the gospels to tell us of the angel’s prophecy and the fulfillment of the promise; we have Christ who came and died and rose again; we have saints across the ages who have testified to the good news and passed it on from generation to generation to us. It is still a wonder!

 But as wonder-full as belief may be after all these years, Mary’s belief must have been sorely tried at the other end of Jesus’ life – at the cross. As you heard from John’s Gospel account, Mary was one of those standing at the foot of the cross watching her son die an excruciating death. The death of a child is painful enough, but to watch it unfold before you in such a painful public way must have been unbearable. It may well have moved Mary to ask God: Why me? Why choose me to bear this child and now to bear the pain of his suffering? What did he do to deserve this? Why was I chosen to suffer with him? I wonder if she recalled the words of old Simeon who called the baby Jesus “God’s salvation” and blessed Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus before whispering to her:

*This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*

Standing at the foot of the cross Mary’s soul was surely pierced! It has been said that when you lose a child you lose the future – all the hopes and dreams for that child and for you with that child. I suspect those were lost for Mary there, for there is no hint that she was any different from the rest of Jesus’ disciples in understanding his hints about resurrection. I can’t help but wonder if she wondered if it had all been in vain or a false dream – the angel, Elizabeth’s awe-filled words to her, the miraculous birth, the wise men and shepherds, the flight to Egypt, the miracle at the wedding at Cana. To the angel Gabriel Mary had said, “Let it be with me according to your word.” There at the foot of the cross, I wonder if she had second thoughts – or perhaps not. Perhaps even the pain of watching him die could not surpass the love she had for him – and him for her. From the cross, the crucified Jesus spoke to her and to the disciple John, saying: “Woman, here is your son. Son, here is your mother.” Reflecting on those words, Frederick Buechner writes:

*He didn’t say goodbye to her or anything like that. But it’s as if here at last he finally spoke to the awful need he must have always sensed in her….It was his going-away present to her really, somebody to be the son to her that he had had no way of being himself, what with a world to save, a death to die. He would be present in that disciple, he seemed to be saying, for her to live for, and to live for her.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

And there she stayed, to the bitter end, to his last breath, to his death – a mother grieving over her son.

 Mary never asked to be the mother of the Son of God, never asked to be the one to birth him and nurse him and rear him and feed him and teach him and love him and then watch him suffer and die. It was a blessing and a burden thrust upon her, a responsibility she humbly accepted with those nine grace-filled words: *Let it be with me according to your word.* There is no indication that at any time in her life she recanted those words. Instead she lived into them all the way to Bethlehem and to Nazareth and to the cross and to the empty tomb. In so doing, Mary sets an example for us – an example of humble obedience and persistent faithfulness and steadfast love, come what may.

 You and I have our own blessings for which to be grateful, and we have our own burdens to bear. Can we bear those burdens as graciously and faithfully as Mary did? Can we say, “Lord, let it be with me according to your word – whatever that word may be, whatever that word may mean for me and for those I love”? For, to ***lead*** in God’s service is to ***follow*** where God leads – humbly, faithfully, persistently – to the end, as did Mary. Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, “Mary” in *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1979, p.100 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)