
Mary:

Great Affirmations

Message by Steve McElroy, Guest Speaker

Sunday Sermon Dec 22, 2013

Scripture Passage Luke 1:26-38, 46-56

Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada

Luke 1:26-38 – The birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; **you have found favor with God.** ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ **For no word from God will ever fail.**"

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "**May your word to me be fulfilled.**" Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:46-56 – Mary's Song

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Introduction

Part 3 of the 'Approaching Christmas' series

- ❖ Three weeks ago we heard the prophet Isaiah say, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light."
- ❖ Last week the priest Zechariah said the same thing in different words: "the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness."
- ❖ Now the predicted event is coming closer and closer. The angel Gabriel is back, and the divine spotlight shifts to Mary.
- ❖ And the prophecy is coming even clearer: For the first time we hear that the coming One will be called Jesus, and that this Jesus will be called the Son of God.

The big story

- ❖ God's purposes continue to unfold. We see prophecy and fulfilment. We also see some interesting parallels in the stories of Isaiah, Zechariah and Mary.
 - ❖ All three had faith in God; each one of them was concerned to obey and to honour the Lord.
 - ❖ All three had some kind of direct *encounter* with the Lord.

- ❖ All three were overwhelmed by fear and awe at the holy presence of God.
 - ❖ *But*, God's first response, to each one of them, was to reassure them and comfort them.
 - ❖ And each one of them was *transformed* by the experience.
- ❖ Even though there were similarities, the Lord spoke very particularly into the lives of Isaiah, Zechariah and Mary.
 - ❖ Each one of them played a unique role in the unfolding of the Christmas story.
 - ❖ That means that their stories help us to understand God's purposes. Each one of them holds up a mirror to Jesus.
 - ❖ Mary holds up the mirror in two ways: in her encounter with the angel Gabriel, and then in the song of praise that she says in response.
 - ❖ In our Bibles this is called Mary's Song. The traditional Latin name is the Magnificat.
 - ❖ This morning we are going to focus specially on Mary's song. But in order to lead into it, we'll also look at the story.

Who was Mary?

- ❖ Who was Mary?
- ❖ Today we know her as one of the most famous women in history. In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions she is the most venerated woman of all time.
- ❖ Even the Muslim Koran contains a book named after her – That's the *only* book in the Koran named after a woman.
- ❖ But the gospel doesn't tell us anything of Mary's background. It only tells us that she was a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph; and it tells us that Joseph was a descendent of King David.
- ❖ One striking thing that's not immediately apparent is that according to Jewish custom a girl would be pledged for marriage when she was 12 or 13 years old.
- ❖ Mary is little more than a child when this event takes place.

The Angel visits Mary

- ❖ So: "in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy" – that's the wife of Zechariah, who we studied last week – "God sent the angel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to [the virgin Mary, to this young girl]."
- ❖ I want to look at just three things that were said in this exchange between Mary and the angel. The first two were spoken by the angel; the third was Mary's response.

God's favour

- ❖ The first word: the angel tells Mary, "*You have found favour with God.*"
- ❖ In the story of Zechariah we were told that he was righteous and obedient.
- ❖ We're *not* told these things about Mary. That doesn't mean she wasn't righteous or obedient, but the text doesn't say.
- ❖ But listen to what the angel does say: And just to make sure we don't miss it, he says the same thing three times to Mary:
 - ❖ "*Greetings, you who are highly favoured.*"
 - ❖ "*The Lord is with you.*"
 - ❖ "*Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.*"
- ❖ We know that Mary received God's word. She welcomed it, just like Zechariah. She received it as personal blessing, and as a fulfilment of Israel's aspirations.
- ❖ But the angel's words remind us that God's favour is a gift. Mary's son will be a gift. God brings Jesus into this world as a gift.
- ❖ Wouldn't it be wonderful to hear those words ourselves – "The Lord is with you ... you have found favour with God."?
- ❖ I want to talk a bit more about that in a few minutes.

God's unfailing word

- ❖ For now we see that the favour bestowed upon Mary is awesome: "He will be called the son of the Most High ... his kingdom will never end."

- ❖ But, like Zechariah, Mary struggles to believe: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”
- ❖ For some reason Gabriel doesn’t chastise her the way he did Zechariah.
 - ❖ Perhaps because Mary is still young.
 - ❖ Perhaps because giving birth as a virgin is a pretty challenging idea. It’s bewildering.
- ❖ Whatever the case, the angel explains: Mary will give birth by the Holy Spirit. Then he cites Elizabeth, who is now pregnant, as evidence of God’s power to do this miracle.
- ❖ That leads to the second word I want to highlight: “*For a word from God will never fail.*”
- ❖ Many people today don’t have anything they really believe in. And that’s so sad.
- ❖ Because if we don’t have anything to believe in, what is there in this life that we can really trust in.
- ❖ And without trust, how can we have peace?
- ❖ Some people *do* believe but they still can’t trust.
 - ❖ Many of our Muslim friends in Indonesia would agree with the angel’s statement – “A word from God will never fail.”
 - ❖ But if we ask if they have assurance of God’s favour, they can’t say. They can’t really say they can trust him for their forgiveness and salvation.
- ❖ The angel tells Mary that God’s word will never fail, and that she has his favour. So she can trust in the good news.

Mary’s response

- ❖ The third word I want to share with you is Mary’s response. It’s very simple: “I am the Lord’s servant. *May your word to me be fulfilled.*”
- ❖ Mary *does* trust in the Lord.
- ❖ Make no mistake, people will be whispering and staring and pointing fingers. “The girl’s pregnant; she’s not married!”
- ❖ Should she tell them what she saw, what the angel said? If she does, she can expect taunts and jeers and ridicule: “Will you listen to the story she’s come up with. Can you imagine?”

- ❖ Mary knew the names they would throw at her. But she also knew who she was: “I am the Lord’s servant.”
- ❖ Let’s hear her speak for herself in the song of praise. If you like, I invite you to follow along in your Bibles, starting at Luke 1:46.

Great Affirmations

- ❖ When my wife was pregnant with our first child we had no idea about what it would be like to carry a baby. So we bought a book.
- ❖ The book was called *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, and it became our guide as we went through the pregnancy.
- ❖ When I first thought to talk about Mary’s Song, I had it in my mind to speak on the theme of expecting.
 - ❖ We’re in Advent, approaching Christmas but not there yet, waiting for something wonderful that has been promised ...
 - ❖ And it seems so appropriate – Mary herself is ... expecting.
- ❖ The problem is, when I read the text, I realize that Mary doesn’t talk about expectations. Instead, she starts with an exclamation.

Mary’s response

Her exclamation

- ❖ *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...*
- ❖ It’s an *exclamation* – of joy and praise and celebration and thanksgiving ...

Her reason

- ❖ And she gives a reason: *He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*
- ❖ The angel said that Mary had found favour with God. She *knows* this is true.
- ❖ So an exclamation: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Mary responds to the news of Jesus’ birth, and her role in it, with praise and worship.

Mary's affirmations

- ❖ The exclamation is followed by – for the rest of the song – what can be described in a single word: *affirmation*. Mary *affirms* what God has done.
- ❖ This is the interesting thing for me.
 - ❖ The baby's not born yet.
 - ❖ None of Jesus' miracles have happened yet. We've not yet heard his teaching. None of the astonishing events surrounding his resurrection have taken place.
 - ❖ No one has even imagined the founding of the church. None of it has happened yet.
 - ❖ Yet Mary affirms that God has done it.
- ❖ She actually makes a *series* of affirmations, and I want to share these with you. As I did last week with Zechariah, I invite you to reflect with me as we hear Mary's voice.
 - ❖ Can we make the same affirmations that she does?
 - ❖ What does she have to teach us – this young girl who was favoured by God?
 - ❖ Can we experience God's favour in the way that she did?

Personal testimony

- ❖ Her affirmation starts with a personal testimony. *From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.*
- ❖ Christmas can be an exciting time – decorations, music, the hustle and bustle of the malls, food, gatherings with friends and family.
- ❖ Actually for some people it can be one of the loneliest times of the year.
- ❖ But whether we're surrounded by people or isolated, we don't really experience Christmas until we experience it like Mary did, right here, in the heart.
- ❖ Do you believe that God sent Jesus into the world for you? Do you feel it? Do you know it?
- ❖ God has done great things for me. If nothing else, I pray that each one of us would be able to affirm this, this year.

Celebration of who God is

- ❖ The rest of the song is a celebration of who the Lord is. One by one, Mary affirms the qualities that make her God, the God of Israel, worthy of praise.

God is merciful (50):

- ❖ Singer-songwriter Don Moen has a line in one of his songs that says, "We are desperate for your mercy"
- ❖ Mary affirms that that God will be there for those who have this attitude. He'll be there if we acknowledge and reach out to him.
- ❖ If we're not experiencing Christmas right here [---point to the heart---], could it be that we've forgotten our need for mercy?
- ❖ If we have, isn't this a good time to remember?

God is powerful (51):

- ❖ *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*
- ❖ When we see some of the depth and complexity of the world's economic and political and social problems, we wonder – is anyone able to sort it out?
- ❖ Mary affirms that God is able – he's shown it in the past, and can be trusted for the things to come.
- ❖ I know, there are lots of times when things seem out of control, in our world and in our lives.
- ❖ But the angel *himself* affirms that the Lord is still in control: "a word from God will never fail."
- ❖ Can we trust in his power? Can we take God on his word?

God is just (51-52):

- ❖ *He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*
- ❖ My wife and I work among the urban poor in Jakarta ...
 - ❖ [---story: "If you are rich, Jakarta is heaven; if you are poor, Jakarta is hell."]
 - ❖ [---story: "The government doesn't care. If we get sick, we die.---]

- ❖ Contrast that with Jesus, who said, “[The Spirit of the Lord] has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to set the oppressed free.”
- ❖ If God is just, do we share his heart to lift up the poor, the hurting and the humble?

God is good (53):

- ❖ *He has filled the hungry with good things ...*
- ❖ I believe that this addresses one of the most fundamental questions of the human relationship with God: “Is God good?”
- ❖ Crime and violence and war, personal tragedy, the voices we hear – these things can cause us to doubt, even to question God.
- ❖ Can we still affirm that God is good – that his creation is good, that he is good to me, that he will make it right?
- ❖ If we can, as Mary does, we have hope. And this leads to her final affirmation.

God is faithful (54-55):

- ❖ *He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.*
- ❖ The announcement by the angel that Mary would give birth to the Son of God was the fulfillment of a promise – a promise that God would defeat sin and death.
- ❖ Mary affirms that we can hold on to that promise, because God is faithful.
- ❖ Earlier I asked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could hear God say that we have his favour?”
- ❖ He’s already said it. There’s another part to that passage I just read:
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor ... *and to announce the year of the Lord’s favour.*”
- ❖ Can we hear his voice: “You have found favour with God”?
- ❖ Are we living to seek his favour?
- ❖ Are we holding on to the promises of God?

What is advent?

- ❖ Yes, it’s a time of expectation ...
- ❖ But more than that, it’s a time of *affirmation* ... for affirming what God has already done in our lives and in the world.

- ❖ Perhaps for you, it’s a time to receive him. Because, you see, as God comes to us in Christ, he also invites us to him, in Christ. God has already done his part.
- ❖ Living and working in Indonesia, I have been struck by the contrast between the great religious events of Islam and of the Christian faith
 - ❖ In Islam, the focus is on what we have to do for God: perform the fast throughout the month of Ramadan, perform the sacrifice of Idul Adah, make the pilgrimage to Mecca.
 - ❖ But at Christmas, and also at Easter, we celebrate *what God has done for us* ...
- ❖ Why does Mary have this amazing testimony? Because God has *already* showed his mercy, his power, his justice, his goodness and his faithfulness – and she affirms it.
- ❖ Some time ago I flew into Toronto and saw some display ads at the airport:
Lester B. Pearson International Airport: For you, for the world.
- ❖ That’s a great slogan ... but you know what, it’s not original – Mary said it first
 - ❖ God is for me: He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant
 - ❖ And God is for the world: His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
- ❖ How about us? How do we approach Christmas?
- ❖ Certainly we can approach in expectation. But we can do more than that; we can approach it in affirmation –
 - ❖ affirmation that God in Jesus is for me ...
 - ❖ and affirmation that God in Jesus is for the whole world ...
- ❖ Let’s pray that it may be so.

