

HANDLE WITH HUMILITY

Christmas in Mary's Hands

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Handling Christmas

For many of us, it feels like the volume knob on life's usual noise and needs gets turned way up this time of year, doesn't it? It's like some great power reaches out and pokes the speed control button on life's treadmill and, with each beep, we find ourselves running faster and faster. Many years, we start the holiday season with great hopes about how meaningful it will be. Before too long, however, we start looking forward to Christmas Day -- less as the culmination of some great celebration, than as the finish line after which we can finally collapse.

Research suggests that there is more over-the-top drinking, down-at-the bottom depression, and out-and-out family conflict at this time of year than at any other. It's the worst period for suicides, the hardest time for those who've lost a loved one, the toughest month for travelers. The usual garden variety road rage mutates into its Christmas cousin: Parking Space Rage. Actually, I think that favorite song they play on the radio this time of year has it backwards: It's reindeer that ought to be worried about being run over by a grandma at the Mall!

All those expectations that are insanely high most of the year anyway, get even more cranked up during December. I read of this kid who wrote one of those "Letters to Santa" that usually warm our heart. "Dear Santa, "you did not bring me anything good last year. You didn't bring me anything good the year before that. Santa, this is your last chance. Signed Alfred."¹ Wow! Handling Christmas is getting harder even for Santa.

For all these reasons and more, I think, we need to recover the wisdom at the heart of the original Christmas. Buried beneath all the "Chrismania" our culture has layered over this holiday still lies this absolutely staggering gift. I think that if we can take it in, we'll find that we're not only able to handle *this* season better, but also move more wisely through all of the seasons we face ahead. To get at this gift, we're going to be looking this month at how the people who first faced Christmas handled it themselves and what that teaches us. Today we begin with the story of the person to whom Christmas came first.

The Message to Mary

The Bible says that **"In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary"** (Luke 1:26-27). Now, let

me pause here and focus on those words -- **"In the sixth month, GOD..."** -- because in this apparent "throwaway" detail lies a truth that is vital to handling Christmas and, indeed, life itself. Mary would have been about fifteen or sixteen years old at this point – the usual time when a Jewish girl was betrothed to be married. But it wasn't the *sixth month* of that year in Mary's life to which the Bible is referring. It wasn't the *sixth month* of Mary's engagement we're being told about. In fact, it wasn't the *sixth month* of any schedule that Mary would likely have had on her handheld, if she'd had one. That's the point.

The dating here is relative to something that had happened outside Mary's life altogether. Six months earlier, God had made an announcement to a relative of Mary's named Elizabeth, telling her that she was going to have a baby who would become the advance man for the prophesied Messiah. The specification of the **"sixth month,"** is simply Bible shorthand for saying "at just the right moment in the perfect flow of what God was already doing beyond Mary's life" this next thing happened that caught up Mary's story in a much larger story.

Why is this important? Well, it is because most of us (me included) live our lives with our nose to the calendar of what WE are doing, of what WE are planning to do, of what WE need to get done. This normal way of approaching life is what gets intensified in periods like Christmas. But, ironically, it is exactly *opposite* from the mentality we are invited into by the original Christmas story. Christmas is about what GOD is doing, about what GOD is planning to do, about what GOD needs to get done. The setting of this story is this moment when Mary is about to receive the news that God himself is working out an agenda that is not only vastly greater than anything on her planning list, but which is going to play havoc with that list.

The Bible says that **"The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; HIS kingdom will never end.' 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'"** The angel answered, **"The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God"** (Luke 1:28-37).

The text says that **"Mary was greatly troubled at [these] words,"** and you can see why, can't you? Mary had gone through her life (as many people today still feel they do) largely *uninterrupted by God*. She'd heard the story of God's great deeds in Israel's

past. She'd heard religious leaders talk about the kingdom of God. But what did all that really have to do with her? She was a bystander, a distant observer of the things of God. Now, however, the angel was saying that this was no longer to be so. God had noticed her, had actually highly favored her, and was expecting something very significant from her. And like the kid who sits in the back row at school or the person who hides in the back row at church and is suddenly called upon, Mary gasped.

It was disturbing on a second level too. Mary no doubt had some fairly set plans for her life. She was a virgin and planned to stay that way – at least until her marriage with Joseph was consummated. She was going to be Joseph's wife. She probably planned to settle down in Nazareth and raise an ordinary family. She was going to have as simple and uncomplicated a life as she could construct. She'd try to stay out of the way of the Romans and clear of those religious people around which there was always so much bloodshed and controversy. But now, she was being told that she had been selected to bear some kind of cosmic child, not even of Joseph at all.

What this fully meant, Mary could not possibly see. She could certainly imagine the trouble it would create with her betrothed and their families. Mercifully, however, she did not know that this calling would require that she flee with her child far from Nazareth to Egypt to escape the sword of Herod. She did not understand that it meant she'd stand one day upon a bloodstained hill and watch her son die in agony upon a cross. She could not possibly foresee the journey she'd make one morning to an empty tomb or know that her son's life would change the course of history not just in Israel but all across the world. But standing there in Nazareth that day, one thing had to have been very clear to Mary: If the Messenger's words were true, life was about to get a lot more complicated and that too had to have been greatly troubling. None of this was anywhere on her life's shopping list or seasonal plans, before the angel appeared, before Mary was met by what I'll simply call, "The Divine Interruption."

The Divine Interruption

Do you understand that God's providence continues to work like this? On one level, of course, what happened with Mary is a once-in-eternity event. No one else ever has or ever will be called upon to play the unique role in salvation history that Mary was called to play. No one else will ever be asked to bear the Word made flesh in exactly the way she was. But the choice that was presented to Mary is, in another sense, presented to every one of us this Christmas and every day of our lives.

Again and again there come these moments when you and I are confronted by some Divine Interruption. We're out in the midst of some day or place and our mind is on our to-do list, our heart is set on our wish list, our soul and strength is bent on pursuing our carefully laid plans. But, then, very suddenly and without warning, the Word of the Lord comes to us. "I want you to stop and talk to that person. Find out what is really going on in that life and see if you can be of support to them." Or the Word says: "I want

you to give to meet that need. Those resources I've entrusted to you – it was for this moment that I gave them to you. Use them now." Or maybe the message is: "Pick up the phone and call that person with whom your relationship is broken. Cross the distance between you. Ask for forgiveness or forgive them. Don't worry about whether or not they'll reject your advance; just do what you can to repair the relationship. This is my way."

Perhaps the Word that comes to you is: "Start praying for that person by name. Ask them to be given the grace they need right now." God's Word may be: "Go to him or her and encourage them about the gifts you see in them." It could be: "Share the hope that lies within you" or "Invite that person to come with you, so they can meet me and my people." The Word of God might be: "Put away the work and spend time with that child." Or maybe the Word to you in this busy season is: "Please remember that you are my child. Slow down. Be still. Come away from what you are doing spend time with me. I'll help you think and see more clearly than you could ever do without my rest."

You know, I think it's interesting that, when depicting Mary in portraits, some medieval artists were fond of portraying her as having particularly large ears. It wasn't because they didn't know how to draw a human head to scale. It was because they were trying to get across a message. The message is that the organ of *conception* is first of all the organ of *reception*. Mary was able to bear the Word only because she first of all could hear the Word. How's that going for us?

To be a hearer of the Word of God requires one attribute or orientation of the heart that is becoming as uncommon as public Nativity displays in our day. Hearing God's Word requires great HUMILITY. Some of us are "**greatly troubled**" in this area of our life. God is trying to speak his Word to us, but we have already decided in our minds: "**How can this be?** God wouldn't really speak to me. He may speak to preachers, to the Pope, to missionaries, but not to me. I'm more of a spectator, a sideline supporter of the things of God." It *sounds* like humility, but it is actually an unexamined form of pride. It is an outright denial of God's power. "He couldn't speak in a way I would hear," we say, when the blazing message of the angel clearly is: "**Nothing is impossible with God**" (Luke 1:37).

More often, I think, God IS speaking, but we are not listening. If truth be told, a lot of us have become content with remaining in the spectators seats when it comes to the dramatic work of God. God is every bit as eager and ready to speak his Word into us as he was to anyone else we meet in the Christmas story. He wants to see his Life borne in and through us in all the ways I described earlier. But if we have our plans, our lists, our fierce and fixed agendas from which we will not be distracted or dissuaded... if we are more focused on handling all the *stuff* of Christmas, than trying to take into our heart the substance of Christmas – the gift of his Word to us and his Work

through us – then we'll miss out on the real glory of this season that helps ready us for the seasons to come.

So here's the invitation: Let's seek to be more receptive in these days ahead. Let's set aside some time to be quiet amidst the jingle bells. Let's pay attention to those promptings that come upon us from. Let's remember that God will likely not reveal to us -- any more than He did to Mary -- all that obeying his word may cost you or all the blessing that might flow from you if you answer His call. But when He says in some way, "I am favoring you with this interruption," let's not miss the moment. Let's respond humbly as Mary did, saying: **"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me according to your Word."**

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Handling Christmas (Part 2)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. When have you felt "greatly troubled" by something that you felt God was saying to you? Why?
2. Do you ever feel like a by-stander or spectator rather than a player in the Word and work of God? If not, why not? If so, what is that like?
3. In what ways does all the "stuff" of Christmas make it difficult for you to receive the "substance" of Christmas?
4. Do you ever experience God speaking to you? How does it happen?
5. What is one particular "Word" from the Lord that you sense you are meant to receive and act upon?
 - Carry someone's burdens (Gal 6:2)
 - Give to the needy (Luke 6:38, Mark 6:37, Luke 18:32)
 - Confess, forgive, reconcile (Luke 6:41; Jas 5:6; Col 3:13)
 - Pray for someone (Lk 6:38; Mt 5:44; Jas 5:6; 2Th 3:2)
 - Encourage someone (2Sam 19:7; 1Th 5:11; Heb 3:13)
 - Share my faith or an invitation (1Pet 3:15; Mat 22:9)
 - Invest in a child (Prov 22:6; Mark 10:14)
 - Seek stillness, solitude, rest (Ex 14:14; Ps 46:10; Mk 6:31)
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¹ Bruce Thielemann, "*Glory to God in the Lowest*"