



Mary's Heart: Advent Bible Study Luke 1:26-38, 46-55 and Luke 2:16-19

Introduction to the Study:

Protestants in general have tended to shy away from placing much emphasis on Mary in our theology, for fear of being considered Catholic. Other than as a serene, but usually silent, figure in the Christmas program and a grief-stricken character in the Easter pageant, we don't see much of Mary as we preach and teach our way through the year. Such tendencies rob us of things Mary's witness has to teach us. This Advent study will provide opportunity for learning from Mary during one of the seasons in which she has much to teach us.

What Kind of Heart?

Among all the people in the Gospel story, Mary is a character of such holiness and esteem that we allow ourselves to forget that she was human. Biblical scholars are not uniform in their estimate of her age or station when God's Messenger, Gabriel, came to her with astounding news. She must have been quite young because marriage occurred much earlier in her time than in ours. She may well have been poor, but then most of the people about whom we read in Scripture were, when compared to the lifestyle we have come to take for granted. Among all the things we will never know about Mary, many of us continue to ask what it was about her that made her a suitable choice for the role God chose for her to play in the salvation of the world. What kind of a heart must she have had to gain such favor with God? How can we nurture those same attributes in our own hearts?

An Open Heart (Luke 1:26-38)

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." "Hail, Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with you." However we say it, Gabriel's greeting to Mary must have come as a surprise. For a young girl already betrothed to the man her family had chosen for her, such a greeting must have been unsettling. Nazareth was not a big or influential place. Mary was looking ahead to the same kind of life most of the other women she knew would have, a life of faithfulness to God and service to her family and community. She hoped that the relationship her family had arranged for her would be a good one, but, at the very least, she knew she would be provided for and would not be a burden to her family. Most women in her time hoped for much more.

Gabriel, however, spoke of things she could not have imagined. She barely understood the relationships that existed between men and women and was probably apprehensive about the things that would be expected of her when she and Joseph were married. And now here was Gabriel announcing that she would have a child who already had a name, and a mission.

For many people, anything outside the parameters we have already drawn around our lives is not conceivable. We know how things are supposed to go, and we are not much interested in things

that do not fit into our plan. Mary's heart was different. To be sure, she had questions, and she was not hesitant to ask, "But how can this be?" But when Gabriel told her that God had chosen her to bear the Christ, she was open to things she could not have considered possible before. Her experience with God, nurtured in worship and prayer, had taught her that God was able to do great things. She knew the stories of God's interaction with people for generations. If God had led Noah and Moses and David and all the others whose stories she knew so well, then who was to say that God would not lead her, too.

There must have been many other questions in Mary's mind that day, too. What would people think? What would they say? How would Joseph respond? What about her family? Would they be shamed or supportive? Whatever apprehension Mary experienced, her confidence in God's providential care and her assurance in God's ability to care for her overcame them. As difficult as it must have been for her to consider what lay ahead, Mary's heart was open to God's call and empowerment in her life.

To Think About Together

How much of your own life has become so predictable that you have all but stopped expecting anything different?

How much of the ministry of your Women's Group or even your whole congregation is that way?

The Advent season is a time for hope, a time to look for signs of God's promise among us. Pray with other members of your group for openness to God's continuing call, especially when it comes in unexpected ways.

Read through the Advent hymns in your hymn book or in other collections of seasonal songs. Look for lines that speak about Mary's openness to God's call in her life. Select one or more of these songs to sing with your group. (Maybe even learn a new one!) Pray together for similar openness to God in your own hearts.

A Hopeful Heart (Luke 1:46-55)

Until God's Messenger visited Mary, there was not much that was hopeful in her life. Her people, neither her immediate family or her broader faith community, were not prominent. Her future was pretty well set. Women in her day did not have educational or career opportunities. To be betrothed to a man who could provide for her and to be able to bear him children and care for her family was goal enough for most women.

Mary, like everyone else who shared her faith, went to worship week after week and year after year. She heard the leaders read from the scroll of Isaiah about how God would send the Messiah to make things different and about how the Messiah would be born to a Virgin. Like many other young women had for generations, Mary may well have wondered if she might be the one. Those hopes may have seemed pretty futile to a young woman without much to recommend her for such a position. However, Mary had learned from her practice of her faith to place her hope in God and in no other.

When Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, events most of us would

consider strange occurred again. God revealed something special about Mary and her child to Elizabeth, and she shared that revelation with Mary. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” are words Catholics recite in prayer as part of the Hail Mary or Ave Maria prayer. Many Protestants are not even aware that the words come from Luke’s Gospel and from Elizabeth’s encounter with Mary. In response to Elizabeth’s greeting, Mary speaks powerful words we have come to know as the Magnificat. The word comes from the Latin word which opens Mary’s speech, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary’s words quickly turn from her own situation to describe what God is doing through her for the benefit of all people.

The Hebrew people were not powerful or influential among the world powers of their day. When Mary speaks of scattering the proud and bringing down the powerful, she expresses the feelings of generations of faithful people who wondered why God allowed others to prosper while God’s faithful people languished. Lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things are metaphorical ways of saying that God has good things in store for God’s people. Mary may have hoped and even dreamed that those good things might come her way, but she could never have known how directly she would be involved. Her confidence, as her bold words indicate, was in God. And God’s fulfillment of the promise of a Savior in the form of Mary’s child demonstrated God’s worthiness of the confidence of Mary and of all faithful people.

To Think About Together

In the hymn book or other collection of Advent songs again, find “For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed.” Read the text of the hymn aloud carefully for the group. Sing the hymn together. Then discuss how you as individuals and as a group respond to the final stanza and its effort to connect Mary’s experience with our own.

What are your most sincere hopes, for yourselves as individuals, for your Women’s Ministry group, and for your church and its ministry?

How do your hopes relate to your understanding of God’s hopes for yourself, your group, and your church?

How confident, honestly, are you of God’s willingness and ability to fulfill your hopes?

A Reflective Heart (Luke 2:16-19)

How many Christmas pageants can you remember in which the final scene presents Mary holding the baby Jesus in her arms, draped in her borrowed blue shawl, after the burlap-wearing shepherds and the velour-bathrobed Wise Men have left, while someone off stage reads the words, “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” As the light fades to darkness, and everyone prepares to celebrate another successful Christmas program with cookies and punch, Mary’s reflection on all the events surrounding the birth of her child remain as the closing image of the season.

The Advent and Christmas seasons are some of the busiest times of the year for church people. In addition to all the responsibilities that come with trying to finish a school term before the holidays, getting all the shopping done, preparing for and attending all the special gatherings that are so much a part of the season, cooking, decorating the house, the church has extra activities

for children and families, practices for programs and choir special events, and we think we have to do it all if we are to celebrate a meaningful Christmas. There is little time for reflecting on the real meaning of the season—the birth of a Savior who will set us free and bring us new and everlasting life. The church may provide or recommend special things to read and guides for prayers with our families, but we rarely have time to use them. Day after day, our intentions are good, but we find ourselves falling exhausted into bed without having lit Advent candles with our children again, and we feel like failures as spiritual guides for our families.

Finding time for reflection is essential during this season. Mary’s time of reflection came after all the excitement had died down, perhaps before the full reality of what had happened had dawned on her. Traveling does not come easy even today in the late stages of pregnancy. Consider Mary’s plight, journeying to Bethlehem with Joseph, and delivering her child while there. Away from the comforting presence of her mother or others who had planned to help, Mary delivered her child in a borrowed place amid strange people and even stranger circumstances. Then came all those visitors. And don’t forget the animals with whom Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus shared their lodging.

Still, when it was all over, Mary reflected on all that had happened and took time to remember God’s care through it all.

This holiday season will not likely be any less busy and hectic than any other for members of your group. Take advantage of the opportunities your congregation or community will provide for some quiet time during this season. You’ll need them. And you’ll be thankful for them.

To Think About Together

It’s difficult to think about adding one more thing to the busy schedules we all keep during Advent, but consider setting aside a time when you might open your sanctuary or other place at your church and simply invite people to come and enjoy some quiet time. If your congregation has a Christmas tree or Advent wreath in your worship space, perhaps you could set aside one or more times during the week when the sanctuary is not in use and provide some suggestions for scriptures or devotional material to read, perhaps some seasonal music to listen to, or, better yet, just some silence. Check with those who coordinate the schedule for your building about scheduling some time for reflection.

If possible, arrange for a soloist to sing “Mary, Did You Know?” for your group. Provide copies of the text for group members to follow as the soloist sings. Encourage participants to think quietly about Mary’s ponderings throughout her time of preparation and delivery of our Savior.

Prayer

God of hope and promise, give us hearts like Mary’s heart: open to your call and power; hopeful for your will; and reflective of your love’s wonders. Then help us to share what is in our hearts with those with whom we share the joy and wonder of this season. Bless us, God, and help us to bless others. Amen.