

Overshadowed

A Sermon for December 24, 2017 (The Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Luke 1:26-38

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Have you ever found yourself in way over your head?

I know this is probably silly compared to some of your experiences, but it felt like a really big deal to me at the time. I played trumpet in the band in middle school. As we were all headed to high school the next year, we were supposed to go at a particular time to the high school to audition for a seat in the higher level band. I hated auditions. In fact, I disliked being in front of people that I skipped the audition altogether. God is so funny.

Since I hated auditions so much, I skipped my audition for the audition-only band, which landed me a seat in the what those who had auditioned disparagingly called the “baby band.” In retrospect, I can see that I didn’t really think this through, because on one of the first days of high school, those who got put in the baby band had to audition to determine which “chair” they would sit in. If you’re the “first chair,” for example, you’re probably always playing the melody, and you’ll frequently be playing solos, since lots of pieces have trumpet solos.

So I auditioned for my seat in the baby band like everyone else and got first chair in the trumpet section. Accordingly, for our first concert I was assigned quite a lengthy solo. It also happened to be one of the most difficult solos I would ever play.

I tried to avoid auditioning, but I had to audition anyway. I sought out the obscurity of the baby band, but immediately found myself facing more attention and pressure to perform than I ever had before. The irony was not lost on me, but I felt like I was in way over my head. As it turned out, with enough practice, I nailed the solo when the concert came. I look back at that experience as a real turning point in my life-- far from the most profound, but certainly an important one. The experience helped me gain confidence in all areas of life, as it turned out.

I tell that story, because Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an obscure person who found herself in over her head. (I'll come back to the in over her head part in a minute)

We're told that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth. Back then, the name Nazareth meant nothing to most people, so Luke has to locate it in the relatively large geographical area of Galilee. It was an obscure place. Most people haven't heard of it. But maybe those from the area who had heard of it would say things like, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

In addition to being raised in a town of nobodies, she was almost certainly young -- a nobody among the nobodies. We know that she was betrothed to Joseph. That means, of course, that she wasn't married. And at that time pretty much the only reason that she'd be betrothed rather than already married was because she had barely come of age. In other words, it's very likely that Mary was a young teenager when Gabriel visited her.

So who is Mary? Well, in the eyes of the world she's a nobody. But look at how God favors her.

Mary is the very first person to hear the name of the savior of the world. "You'll name him Jesus," the angel said. Mary is the first person in the whole world to hear the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, was coming into the world.

Mary quickly proves herself to be up to the task. She wastes no time in believing, and in doing so she says what I believe God thinks are some of the most beautiful words in all of scripture: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I like to consider Mary to be the first Christian.

At the same time, Mary's faith is not a mindless faith, as if she is a puppet with God pulling her strings. Once Mary gets the news, she doesn't turn her brain off. So often that's the criticism leveled at Christians by the world, but those critics talk about what they don't understand.

When Mary was greeted by the angel, it says she is perplexed and she pondered. In other words, Mary begins to ask questions. Is this from God? Am I hallucinating? Is this really an angel? I wonder what's happening here.

There is a type of questioning that the bible doesn't affirm. It's questioning without being open to the possibility of a legitimate answer. That's the type of questioning we see around us so much in the world

today. But then there is another type of questioning that the bible sees positively. It's a humble admission: "actually, I don't understand."

The angel tells Mary she's going to conceive and give birth to a son. In turn, Mary asks a simple, humble question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" This isn't Mary doubting the power of God to do what the angel has said. Mary was certainly a good Jew who understood that the God who created everything that exists could certainly make this happen. Mary is just trying to understand what God is calling her to do. It's as if she's saying, "Ok, Gabriel, I believe you, and it's amazing that God has chosen me for this. But you and I both know how this whole baby thing works. Can you let me in on, um, how exactly this is going to happen? It seems necessary that I know."

There's a wonderful humility and realism here. God loves that type of honest inquiry. More than that though, there is an admission by Mary. "I'm in over my head here, God. Here's the reality: even though I know your will, I am completely incapable of doing this myself."

And so Gabriel responds. It's going to be the work of God-- God the Spirit. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." When the Holy Spirit comes into a person, Jesus begins to live in that person. For her part, Mary was to be so overshadowed, so filled with the Holy Spirit, that Jesus would literally be conceived in her womb.

And just in case Mary held on to any doubt, God gives her a verifiable tidbit of information. "Your cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son in her

old age. Nothing is impossible for God.” You’re not hallucinating, Mary. You can go visit her and see that what I’m saying is true. In fact, that is exactly what happens. In the next scene, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and she finds it just as the angel said -- Elizabeth is six months pregnant.

God is so good. God knows that he’s asking a lot of Mary, and so God provides her with an incredible amount of affirmation and confidence. What we have here is a combination of God’s word, through the angel, and the power of Elizabeth’s testimony. God’s word and the testimony of others. So often these are the two methods that God uses to increase our faith and guide us into the will of God.

But all of this confidence-building comes for a reason. There can be no doubt that Mary was about to enter into a season of incredible trials. She’d be with Elizabeth for three months, but around the time when the baby bump started showing up, she’d be back at home. And it doesn’t take too much imagination to consider the insults that would be thrown at her in her hometown. People would laugh at her and mock her behind her back, and then become silent when she entered the room. People would be nasty to her face:

- “You think you’re the first 14 year old to claim a miracle pregnancy?”
- “You’re no one special, Mary. Stop pretending like it.”
- “Nobody is going to want to marry you now.”
- “Aren’t we supposed to stone people for things like this?”

The more mature folks around her would probably be more mature, asking, “How could you do this Joseph? He’s such a kind young man,

and he's been waiting so patiently for you." Others would just shake their heads and say, "She has such a nice family and she had such a bright future."

There wasn't anything Mary would be able to say that would stop people from thinking what they wanted to think. So often that is the case for those living out the will of God. Without inside knowledge from God, it's sometimes difficult to discern what is of God and what isn't. That's certainly why the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph got his own angelic visitation. God wanted him on board for this.

Because God knew the trials that Mary would face, God gives Mary this incredible personal affirmation with some objectively verifiable details thrown in to strengthen her faith. With this God encounter, Mary would be able to withstand the ignorant taunts and insults of those without eyes to see God at work in her.

This is frequently how the Christian walk goes. In working to fulfill the will of God for our lives, at some point we will face trials and difficulties. Depending on what God has called us to do, they may be small or they may be great. Usually the greater the work God has for us, the greater the trials we will face. But God is always seeking to give us special encouragement to help us know that we're on the right path. As 2 Chronicles 16:9 says, "the eyes of the LORD range throughout the entire earth, to strengthen those whose heart is true to him." God strengthens and affirms those who are putting God's plan first.

So when all of this is said and done, Mary still has a choice. Will she respond like Moses did initially? “Pick someone else!” Or will she respond more like the prophet Isaiah, “Here am I! Send me.”

Of course Mary chooses the Isaiah path. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

So how do we become more like this first Christian? How do we come to respond to God as Mary does?

Very briefly I want to suggest three things:

First, we start adopting Mary’s response in the little things that God asks of us. We say it when we read the scripture. We say it when something specific is clearly being asked of us by God. We might have to say it half-heartedly at first. But we say it anyway: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” The goal of the Christian is to become loose change in God’s pocket, to be spent on whatever God desires-- that’s a sermon for another time. In training ourselves to say yes to God, we *stop* fearing that God is going to shake up our lives, and we *start* fearing that we might miss out on being used by God.

Secondly, we ask questions of God. God provided Mary with the core of what she needed to know just by her listening. That’s what God does for us through scripture. The core of God’s plan for us is there if only we’d take the time to listen to it. But sometimes it’s really helpful to be let in on the particulars. It is the particulars of the situation that God

seems to withhold until we ask and persist in our asking. And so we ask God.

Really practically, this means that as you're doing your daily bible reading, you ask God to elaborate and illuminate the word for you. You start asking God, "where am I in this passage of scripture?" And then God starts to reveal to you what faithfulness means for you in your situation. Usually this process involves some repentance. You begin to say, "forgive me God that too often I've doubted that you're able to do what you said." "Forgive me God that I find myself fearing the changes that your will being done in my life will bring." Then the real listening can begin.

Third, we must desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Mary's response to God is a surrender to being filled with the Holy Spirit. It's inviting God to come and live in you, to control your every thought, word, and deed. It means not just hoping that Jesus is your Savior, but choosing to make him your Lord. It's committing yourself to do what he says. When Mary responded "Here am I," that is the moment when the Holy Spirit begins to overshadow her, and Christ begins to be formed inside her.

That's what we most need as Christians. We need Christ formed in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Galatians, in chapter 4 verse 19, "My little children, I'm going through labor pains again until Christ is formed in you." Having Christ formed in you means living as Jesus would live if he were you in your circumstances. And let's just be honest with ourselves-- that's beyond our ability, we are in over our

heads. And like Mary, we find ourselves asking, “How can this be?” The answer is that we need to be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.