

You've Got to be Kidding!

Message for Sunday, December 12, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

1) Who, What, How?

It was the last day of swimming lessons at the YMCA, and the test always comes on that last day. The instructors have to determine whether the student can pass through to the next level of instruction or stay in the same class for the next session of lessons.

The last item for one group of swimmers was jumping into the deep end of the pool. If needed, the instructor was treading water a short distance away and would help the child to the edge of the pool.

One girl was hanging back in the class. While she had done marvelously on all the tests, she was the last one to get up on the board. This test boggled her mind. There was no way she was going to jump into ten feet of water!

Two instructors were encouraging her to go. If she would only jump into the water she would pass on to the next level. She was obviously a good swimmer, but she couldn't get by this part of the test. I can imagine how some of the conversation went.

"Mary, now jump into the water and you can graduate from the tadpole class into the minnows."

On the outside, Mary was stretching her arms over her head and getting into a diving position. Perhaps she was even saying, "OK." But on the inside, she was saying, "You've got to be kidding."

After standing there without moving for a long minute, Mary hears her instructor saying, "Jump in Mary. You'll be only a few feet away from the edge of the pool."

On the outside, Mary still appears poised to dive, but I can hear Mary thinking to herself, "You've got to be kidding, teacher. Two feet, six feet, or a hundred feet away from the edge, it is still ten feet to the bottom of the pool. I once heard a story about a man drowning in two feet of water."

"Mary, you know I will be right here to catch you and help you if you need it. You have nothing to worry about. Jump right to me."

"What are you, immortal? If I did jump in after standing here for so long, you'd probably have a heart attack, and then I'd be in big trouble. You can talk to me all day

long if you like, but if you think I'm jumping into that pool just to become a minnow instead of a tadpole, you've got to be kidding."

The Mary in the reading from Luke is being talked into something far more preposterous than jumping into a pool with every safeguard and every precaution taken. She is being talked into having a baby — by a most unusual method.

It all starts out when an angel comes to Mary and says, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you, and has greatly blessed you!" With a sense of humour, Luke then writes in his account that Mary is a little taken aback, that she is confused and troubled by his message, and she wonders what kind of way this is to greet someone. Can't you almost hear her saying to herself, "You've got to be kidding!"

Angel visits in any age are considered extraordinary. And the message of this angel is even more disturbing. To begin with, Gabriel addresses Mary like she is a real person or something. Men, and I suppose angels, did not address women in any fashion, much less with the respect and reverence in the gospel. Mary must have wondered who the angel was talking to, or if this was some kind of joke. "He's got to be kidding."

The story gets even more ridiculous. The angel tells her not to be afraid, and that God has been gracious to her. Hah! She is just a poor peasant woman with no special qualifications.

The angel tells her that she will conceive and bear a son who will be named Jesus. This Jesus will be greater than anyone who ever lived, including King David. You can hear the chorus by now, can't you? "You've got to be kidding!"

Mary objects that she is a virgin; how can she possibly have a baby? The angel sweeps all of that aside by telling Mary that the husband issue is no problem, for the child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Put yourself in Mary's shoes. By now, wouldn't you be saying that the angel has to be kidding?

Our two Marys end up differently. We left our swimming student, Mary, at the edge of the pool, and she never did make that leap into the pool. Her doubts were such that nothing short of wild horses could drag her in.

But Mary from the Bible finally says, "I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said." Persuaded by the angel and trusting God, Mary took the leap of faith.

2) What does this mean for us today?

a) Marvel that God would choose us

God is the Creator of the universe; we are creatures on one planet among billions. We may think pretty highly of ourselves, yet in comparison to God we're really not much higher up than earthworms.

Yet God chose to become human, to live among us. God wants to know us, and wants us to know him.

The writer of the Psalms wondered about this also:

Psalm 8:3-5, New Living Translation:

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers —
the moon and the stars you have set in place —
what are mortals that you should think of us,
mere humans that you should care for us?
For you made us only a little lower than God,
and you crowned us with glory and honour.

We do best when we don't try to understand this. Just say "Thank-you, Lord. Thank-you."

b) Keep Christ central in our preparation for Christmas

You can well believe that Mary kept Jesus central in her nine months of preparation for Christmas. So should we.

A little boy was learning the Lord's Prayer, and couldn't manage difficult word "trespasses." So he prayed what he thought he had heard, "Forgive us our Christmases." How true! May Christmas this year be one that we can offer to Jesus, and not one that we are ashamed of.

c) Remember God's power

When Mary questioned how this could happen to her, the angel responded "There is not a thing that God cannot do." Other translations put it, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Chisel these words deeply into your heart. These are five of the mightiest words ever spoken. When you feel hopeless, you can always look to the One who makes things possible.

d) Respond to God, "I am your servant"

Listen again to how Mary answered the angel:

"I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said."

We too, are the Lord's servants. May we serve in the faithful tradition of Mary.

Theme for today: Martin Luther once said that the greatest miracle of Mary's story was not that she conceived, but that she believed. When people today hear about the virgin Mary becoming pregnant, the response is often either rejection — "That's impossible; it's just a legend they put in the Bible" — or ho-hum acceptance — "Yeah, I know that. What else?"

Can we try to put ourselves in Mary's place and feel the unbelievable shock and confusion, eventually turning into belief and trust?