

Scripture Reading:

Luke 1: “39 Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Then [Elizabeth] spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. 45 Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." 46 And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. 54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months, & returned to her house.”

'Behold the Handmaiden of the Lord'

I want to thank Theron and Mike for blessing us through their sermons during the season of Advent. What I hope to do over the next three weeks, as we begin the New Year in the Church calendar, is to use some very familiar characters in the Christmas accounts to illustrate how God uses His Saints to accomplish His purposes!

➤ As we do so, my prayer is that we can learn how they are important examples for us today.

We will, Lord willing, consider Mary, the Wise men and finally Simeon at the Temple. All are strong examples of Biblical faith: Faith that comes with the right attitude, faith that takes the right actions and faith that is always based on a sound understanding of God's will.

I want to begin this week with 'the handmaiden of the Lord' ... Mary. It is only Matthew and Luke who give us details of the birth and young life of Jesus, but ALL four Gospel accounts have John the Baptist, the final prophet of the Old Covenant proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. They all quote Isaiah where we read that John comes as: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low"

This picture of valleys being filled and mountains made low could be applied to many aspects of God's great plan of salvation... God as His Kingdom fills the earth will bring many humble or low nations up and He will take many proud or high nations down.

We have seen this over time with various peoples and even churches.

BUT it also applies to us as individuals and it is here where I want us to focus today

- **I will be using young Mary as our first example of someone God puts on the right path through faithful obedience**

The consideration of Mary can put me on dangerous ground in many protestant circles but as we have said many times, just because Rome has gone off one cliff, it is still not good for us to back off the opposite side. We have read this morning what the Angel Gabriel and Elizabeth have said about Mary and Mary's own proclamation.

- **We must be sure that we present and believe what the Bible says about Mary:**
- **Nothing more and nothing less.**

When we look honestly at what the Bible reveals we see that she is like all of us with valleys that need to be filled in and some mountains that had to be made low. When we consider how God used her and how she responded we have important lessons for us all today and we should not fear to look to her as an example of faithful living. First we must see that she is the mother of God, or more rightly as the Church fathers said, the God bearer. Now please note this is a far cry from to what the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches would say today regarding Mary. They stand near the end of a long erroneous road that began with a small wrong turn long ago...

- **A road that sadly has been well traveled down through church history causing many to stray far from the truth of the Gospel**

And it is something we must understand since there are today many millions of Christians in these churches who we must of necessity deal with on an on-going basis, presenting the truth in love.

We must learn, and challenge others, to present Mary as the Bible does:

- **She was a young virgin who was willing to be used of God to bear His Son**
- **As a mother willing to faithfully raise Him in her home.**
- **As a woman who went on to have a normal marriage with Joseph, bearing other children who we see later as the brothers and sisters of Jesus**
- **And most importantly, to see Mary as a woman in need of Jesus as her Savior, born as we all are under the curse of Adam's sin.**

The errors began there with the thought that no "ordinary" woman could have born the Son of God... So they began to teach that she was more special than other women: That she remained a virgin for her entire life and could now be prayed to in heaven, asking her to appeal for special help from her Son. In 1854 the Roman Catholic Church declared that her birth was also the result of a miraculous conception so she did not bear the curse of Adam's sin and had in fact lived a sinless life. In 1950 the next stop on this erroneous trail has the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church declaring that Mary did not face death, but ascended to heaven where she must be approached for access to her Son Jesus.

- **The final & damnable error that has not yet been officially adopted, but is discussed in many Catholic circles is to consider Mary as co-redemptrix with Jesus**
- **This would be a complete denial of the sufficiency of the work of Jesus to save His people from their sins and the truth that there is NO other name under heaven by which men must be saved.**

When we focus on what the Bible actually teaches us about Mary we see our first important lesson about those valleys:

- Mary asked the Angel to explain what was going to happen and then she said, “behold the hand-maiden of the Lord”
- When she responded to Elizabeth with her magnificent, she praised God as her Savior!

Mary knew her humble estate and she knew that she was a sinner and yet she offered herself as the handmaiden of the Lord

- Through this simple faith and obedience God was able to change the world!
 - Oh, but we say, that was Mary...
 - And look at the task God had chosen her for!
- How can this apply to me?

Well it does, and understanding how it does, helps us to answer the probing question that Greg asked during lunch last week...

- What can we do to overcome the massive problems we see in the Church or the world today??
- We don't see any human way to accomplish what God says will be done
 - God has promised to fill the world with the Kingdom of His Son!
 - Mary was told that while still a virgin she would bear a son!

Now we need to honestly ask ourselves from today's perspective, which is the tougher to believe?

- It is easier to make Mary a special case and to see this as something already done in history.
- BUT when we consider what God calls on us to do today, we have all sorts of reasons and excuses for why it will not work.

We are more likely to respond as Zacharias did, asking God just how He thinks that is going to get it done! Now please note that this did NOT stop God from doing what He said He would do, it just meant that poor Zacharias got to play the more embarrassing role in the Christmas accounts.

When we hear the various commissioning Scriptures that we use at the end of our divine worship service; when we sing one of God's Psalms as well as Simeon's prayer; we must learn to do so with the same attitude and response of Mary... Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.

So what did this handmaiden have to do?

- She bore a son which is natural for women to do
- She accepted even the humble circumstances of the birth, something many in the world today also face.
- She had to raise Jesus in a faithful covenant home...

Did she have to teach Him how to be God? Not hardly

Did she have to teach Him how to eat, to walk, to talk and to play?

- As the Mother of God, yes she did, just like any faithful parents here today are called to do!

As the Mother of Jesus did she teach Him the Scriptures and take Him to the Temple at the appointed times.

- Yes she did, just as faithful parents are called on to do today.

So to begin answering Greg's question, first and foremost we must be busy obeying the simple things that God has instructed us to do in raising faithful covenant children.

You see, Mary did not have to have some special birth to prepare her to be the God-bearer...

- She needed faithful parents and grandparents who taught her to be obedient and humble in her faith!

She knew as we all do, that she was a sinner... But she believed that God was her Savior who fills in the valleys of sin: She was ready to be the handmaiden of the Lord who bore the Son of God.

- So there is no place in the Christian walk for feelings of inadequacy, or inferiority and certainly not depression

Not that all of these things and many other valleys in our lives are not real, but we must see them as what they are... SIN. Yes, basically they are the sin of unbelief and often the solution can be summed up in two words: STOP IT!

God loves and desires to use the humble, the rejected, the downtrodden for His work... He is in the business of filling in valleys and all we have to do is make ourselves available as Mary did!

Now I have to break the news to you that the valley part is the easy part ☺

What does God mean when He had the prophet also declare that the mountains would be brought low? Here we are dealing with what C.S. Lewis called the greatest sin: Pride

Now we turn to the sins of Cain, and King Saul. The sin of Judas and King Herod. They were all those who wanted to serve God on their terms...

- Or more accurately wanted God to serve them on their terms!

Yes, we often want to wallow in those sins in the valleys, refusing to confess and turn from them...

BUT it is so much tougher to deal with the need for confession from the mountaintop of pride.

First and foremost as Lewis and others have rightly pointed out, we often don't even see the problem... Lewis writes: "There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty of themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who is not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."

Mary is a shining example of one who avoided this sin of pride, which struck Zacharias deaf for months. She is an especially important example for our young people today who are encouraged by the world and the flesh to cherish what Jerry Bridges calls the pride of an independent spirit, in his book on Respectable Sins.

Jerry says, "This spirit expresses itself primarily in two areas: a resistance to authority, especially spiritual authority, and an unteachable attitude... When we are young, we tend to think we know everything. Or, as one friend expressed it, "We don't know how much we don't know!"

- Just as many today do not want to think of Mary as a sinner in need of a Savior, as she did...
- So many might recoil at the suggestion that she might have succumbed to pride

The Scriptures show us again that she is human just like us:

- She is the worried mother asking Jesus what He was thinking when He stayed behind at the Temple.
- She is the proud mother ready to put her son's work out front whether He thinks the time is right or not at the wedding of Cana.
- She joins with her other children in thinking Jesus has gone mad during His ministry and attempts to bring Him home to sort things out.

Just as Mary was ready and willing to present herself as the handmaiden of the Lord, so she worked through these lapses of parental pride...

- **We know this because we see her as the faithful mother and servant of Jesus at the end of His earthly ministry.**

What we see clearly in Mary's life is what she declares to Elizabeth under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

- **In other words as the Prophet declared, God has made those proud mountains low and filled in the valley's of despair!**

As Mary goes on to say, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly." We know much more about Mary than we do the Wise men or Simeon, but I trust over these few weeks the examples of their lives will encourage us in our Christian walk for 2010!

- **We must see in these Saints the faithful obedience that God calls all of us to walk in.**

We must begin with the right attitude which we see in Mary. An example the Apostle Paul tells us should come from Jesus Himself when he commands us to: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of your look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

- **This right attitude must then lead to faithful actions:**
 - Mary presents herself as the handmaiden of the Lord
 - The wise men follow the star
 - Simeon takes the baby in his arms.

And we see in the lives of these Saints that all of their faithful actions were based on a proper understand of God's will...

- Mary knew that she needed a Savior
- The Wise men knew the King had been born
- Simeon knew that the Kingdom of Jesus will fill the whole earth!

Each of us must have such living faith grounded in God's Word:

- **We must know Jesus as our Savior**
- **We must know Jesus as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings**
- **AND we must believe that Jesus is going to fill the earth with His Kingdom and that He continues to carry out His plan today with the Saints in His Church...**

And yes, that would be all of us! So let us greet each other and fellowship over our meal today with a hearty Merry Christmas and speak of a Happy New Year of serving in the Kingdom of Jesus!