

## THE FIRST DISCIPLE (Luke 1:26-38)

Advent is kind of like a wedding or a funeral – a time to catch up with folks we haven't seen in a while and won't see again for another year. A couple of weeks ago it was grumpy old John the Baptist coming in from the wilderness to make his annual appearance. Nobody was sad to see him go back to where he came from.

Today it's Mary, a different character altogether, but one who doesn't hang around Protestant churches once Christmas has come and gone. Not that she's not welcome here, but she's a lot more at home in Catholic churches.

I ought to have a special place in my heart for Mary because I was born in St. Mary's Hospital in Galveston. But I don't remember much about that and it doesn't seem to have left much of an impression – at least not enough to overcome all my Protestant upbringing.

We may have relegated Mary to a minor role for most of the year, but we can't ignore her during Advent. Take away Mary and there's no Christmas story. Even if we don't go overboard in our veneration, Mary's still a key player. And for today at least, she's the star.

There's a lot of tradition and folklore about Mary. Early on her perpetual virginity was proclaimed. By the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century she was given the title *Theotokos* or Mother of God. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century the belief had grown up that Mary didn't die but fell asleep and was taken straight to heaven. Theologians in the Middle Ages taught that Mary herself was conceived without sin. That's the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which has nothing to do with Jesus' conception or birth but his mother's, and which most Protestants mix up with the Virgin Birth.

You will find absolutely none of this in the gospels. In fact, you won't find much about Mary at all. A 2<sup>nd</sup> century tradition says her parents were an elderly couple named Anna and Joachim. But who they were really doesn't matter.

What we do know is that she was related to an older woman named Elizabeth, that she was a devout Jew who probably lived in Nazareth (but maybe in Bethlehem), that she was engaged to a man named Joseph, and that she found herself pregnant before the wedding. Not much, but that's it.

There's nothing to suggest that Mary was special in any way. As far as we can tell, she was just an ordinary young woman in 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilee. She wasn't much different from thousands of other ordinary young women living all around her. So the question is: Why did God choose her from among all those ordinary young women? Who knows?

In that sense, Mary's quite typical. Of all the people God enlists, very few are extraordinary. Quite the contrary. God seems to have a predisposition to call the most ordinary folks to do the most extraordinary things. Mary just stands in a very long line of people like that.

What's amazing about this story isn't anything intrinsic about Mary – not her family, not her piety, not her virtue. What's amazing about the story is that God takes such an enormous chance with another nobody.

In fact, God has never balked at taking chances. It all began with creation itself. God made the earth and the sun and the moon and the stars. God made plants and animals. And then God made humans and had the audacity to give them free will. Talk about taking a chance! There was no way of knowing what they would do with free will. They could just ignore God and go off on their own if they chose.

And of course, that's just what we did. We abused our freedom and made a colossal mess of things. We learned to kill one another. We polluted the oceans and fouled the air. And all of that made God very sad. But what was God to do?

One option might have been for God to step in and change human nature. But that really wasn't an option because God didn't want to be loved out of compulsion. God wanted it to be our free choice.

Another option would have been for God to just give up, to say the whole experiment was a great big mistake. The story of Noah and the flood tells us that God was ready to give up and would have if there hadn't been this one righteous family.

Even something as catastrophic as the flood wasn't enough to teach us our lesson, though. God still had a problem. So God tried giving us some rules – even carved them in stone. Didn't make much difference. God sent prophets to warn us to shape up. Their warnings fell on deaf ears. It was enough to frustrate even God.

So the story goes that God called all the angels together for a great heavenly council. Maybe one of them would have an idea. But the angels were baffled, too. They thought and they thought – and came up blank.

Finally God sighed, "Then I guess I'll have to go down there myself." The angels were horrified. Gabriel said, "I've been there, Lord, and it's brutal! You sent me to a couple of the prophets, and we know what they did to them. I think this is a real bad idea!" But God was firm, "Well, unless you've got something better in mind..." Gabriel sadly shook his head.

"Cheer up, Gabe," God replied, "because I've got a job for you, too." Gabriel looked apprehensive. "Don't worry," God assured him. "I just need you to run another little errand – to go down and get things ready for me. You know Mary – lives in Nazareth, engaged to Joseph." Gabriel nodded, "Sure, nice girl, good family." "Right," God said. "Well, all I want you to do is go down and tell her she's going to have a baby. See what she says to that!"

"I can just imagine," Gabriel replied, rolling his eyes. "This doesn't exactly fit her nice girl image, does it?" "I guess not," God said. "But that's the plan, and we're going to give it a try."

Today we heard how the story ends. Gabriel does go to Nazareth and startles Mary out of her wits – and that's before he says a single word about God's cockamamie plan, before he gets down to the details.

Where's the risk in all this? It's very simple: Mary could have said, "No way!" She was free to do just that. And where would that have left God's plan?

God's plan was risky from beginning to end. I once heard someone suggest that maybe Mary wasn't the first young woman God proposed to – that maybe God had tried before, who know how many times, before finding someone to say, "Here I am, Lord." Who knows? All I know is that it sounds plausible because all God could do was propose, not impose. God's entire plan – God's entire purpose – to redeem humanity hung by the fragile thread of a young girl's consent. Thank God for Mary, who must have figured, "Well if God is willing to take this big a chance, so can I."

Mary is called by many names. But because she was the first to say, "Yes!" to God's outrageous plan, she earned the title of "first disciple." And that's the most important one of all.