

# Preparing for Christmas – Mary

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Luke 1:26-38

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## ***Introduction***

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the most wonderful festival of the church year, Jeremy helped us last Sunday by getting us to look again at John the Baptist and reflect on his life and ministry of preparing the way. I want to build on Jeremy's very helpful sermon and today as Christmas is now just a few days away, look at, next to Jesus himself, the most important character in this divine drama of the Incarnation – Mary, the young woman engaged to Joseph, the one chosen to be the mother of Jesus the Messiah.

The story is well know, and is told again and again in nativity plays and crib services, and depicted on Christmas cards, and sung in carols. We have had it read again for us this morning.

But as we look again at this familiar story and reflect on what it all means and try to enter into the wonder and mystery of it all, I want to draw to our attention to three responses which we see in Mary; three reactions in her which we can use to reflect on. See if they strike an accord in you. They are three responses which are there as invitations to us.

The three responses in her were – fear, doubt, and surrender.

### ***(1) Fear***

Fear, in the sense of being apprehensive, hesitant and mystified is not an inappropriate response when we are encountered by God.

Mary's first response was fear.

*<sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."*

*<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God."*

Mary does not express her fear in words, but clearly her troubled reaction her sense of fear and apprehension to the angel's message was conveyed in her body language. Hence the angels immediate response,

*"Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God."*

Time and again we read in Scripture of this response of fear when God reveals himself to a person, because they experience the reality of God's holiness. They become aware of the vast distinction between human beings and God. The mystery of divine holiness attracts and repels at the same time. There is a sense of wonder and awe which is some times quite over whelming.

In his encounter with God, **Isaiah** describes in Isaiah 6 what he saw.

*<sup>1</sup> ... I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup>And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup>At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*

He has a vision of God, and sees the awesome holiness ... the otherness of God. And what he is aware of is just how other he is to God. How unlike God he is. So he responds...

*<sup>5</sup>"Woe to me!" (Its all over,. I am doomed ... his is too much ... I am history) "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*

God is so other to me.

In Genesis 28 we read of how **Jacob** when on the run and sleeping in the open has a dream and has an encounter with God in the dream. On waking up he says ... (Gen 28:16)

*"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."  
17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."*

Why this response of fear? Well you see an profound encounter with God – a moment of revelation as Jacob had, as Isaiah had, as Mary had, will not leave us the same.

God does not come to speak to us to pass the time of day, catch up on news of the grandchildren and find out about holiday plans. He comes to change us. He comes to redirect our path. An encounter with God does not leave us unmoved.

Do you think Mary had plans and dreams? Of course she did. She was getting married. Of course she had plans and dreams and longings and was anticipating with delight and a certain degree of apprehension what the next few months would hold, as any bride before her wedding would.

So when the angel says ...

*"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."*

Her reaction would be "O! O! What is this all about? I think my wedding plans are up for a review."

I can't say that in my life I have encounters of this dramatic nature. But I have had moments when I have been particularly and acutely aware of God's grace and favour and blessings. My journey with the Lord has taught me that that these usually indicate that God has something in mind for me that will demand special attention to his voice and purposeful and radical obedience in the face of voices (within and without) to the contrary.

So as we prepare to celebrate Christmas and long for and anticipate a special encounter with God, do not expect a fire side chat and a catch up about the grandchildren and holiday plans. Expect that God will change your plans.

Fear is not an inappropriate response.

## **(2) Doubt**

When the angel spells out for Mary exactly what changes are in store for her, Mary expresses her doubts.

*<sup>34</sup>“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

Our every sympathy is with Mary, is it not? The message the angel brings her is incredulous and has huge implications. She, a virgin, will bear a child. On the medical front that would be miracle enough. But then add to it the social implications. The penalty for being pregnant out of marriage was stoning, so even if this she does conceive a child by the intervention of the Holy Spirit and carry the baby close to term, the chances would be that both she and the baby would die as penalty for her supposed adultery.

We know with hindsight that God’s spirit did come upon her and she did conceive a child. A medical miracle took place. God intervened. We know too that the angel spoke to Joseph and put it in his heart to protect Mary and the child she carried. We know too that God warned the magi not to return to Herod who was intent on killing the child. God did act amazingly and incredibly took care of every detail – the one’s Mary fore saw and many others she did not or could not have imagined.

That is the nature of God. But doubt is a response we have when God encounters us and reveals to us the plans he has for our lives.

There are many injunctions in Scripture **not to doubt**.

After he had invited **Peter** to join him and he walks on the water, Jesus reprimands Peter when he looks around at the waves and the storm and begins to sink. Jesus reached out his hand and caught him and said,

*“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

**James**, known for straight talking says this in chapter 1:5ff ...

*<sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. <sup>6</sup>But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*

I wonder if he had Jesus words to Peter on the lake in mind? He continues ...  
*<sup>7</sup>Those who doubt should not think they will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup>they are double-minded and unstable in all they do.*

So clearly we are not to give in to doubt. But the way the angel responds to Mary's expression of doubt is not one of condemnation or judgement but one of assurance.

*"The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

That word **overshadow** implies that what you will see is God at work, but you will not see the detail. It will be too bright, too dazzling. But that it is God there will be no mistaking.

And then the angel tells her of a sign that will assure and comfort and strengthen her.

*<sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.*

That this older relative of Mary's will conceive will also be a miracle – a medical miracle – not at quite the same level. It does not compare with the miracle that will take place in Mary. But it does show that God is in the conception business. It gives Mary a stool to stand on. It gives her a step up.

And then comes the word of assurance.

*<sup>37</sup>For no word from God will ever fail."*

God deals graciously with Mary in her doubts. He gives her some explanation. He invites her to see his hand at work. He gives her a sign – an indication that he is at work.

In his pastoral letter Jude gives this advice.

*<sup>21</sup> Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*

*<sup>22</sup> Be merciful to those who doubt*

And he continues two verses later with the Doxology we all know so well.

*<sup>24</sup>To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— <sup>25</sup>to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

We have the assurance that God can deal with our doubts. He meets us in them. He comforts, supports, encourages and gives us a sign. But he clearly invites us to trust him even though we don't see the detail or have all the facts at our finger tips.

Are you in that place this Christmas? Do you have doubts? Do you have questions? Are you trying to figure out how God is going to do what he asked or promised you?

You are in the place Mary was.

Look for the signs of assurance. Look for the indicators that God is able to do what he promised.

Go, like Mary, and hang out with those who have experienced God's miraculous intervention in their lives. There is nothing like hanging out with people who have faith to build your faith.

It says in verse 39 that Mary hurried to Judea to see Elizabeth.

Hurry off to see some one who has faith. Go and hang out with them. Go and stay with them. Invite them over. Listen to their story.

And if you are in the place of being full of faith, the head Jude's words and be merciful to those who are struggling to believe. Feel their pain share their anguish. Encourage and affirm them.

You recall on Easter morning when Peter and John (the beloved disciple) went to the tomb and found it empty and John gets to the tomb first and waits for Peter who went in and saw but did not believe. But when John went in he saw and believed.

I have always wondered what they spoke about as they went back to the city. What was harder – for Peter to be with John who believed, or for John to be with Peter who did not yet believe.

I believe the grace and love of their friendship held them together and was used by God to bring Peter to the place where he could declare in the edge of the lake ... “It is he Lord!”

Here we have a hint at another deep bonding and friendship between these two women – Mary and Elizabeth. What did they talk about? What messages were conveyed between them in the silences they shared? We know not, but our imaginations can be filled by the Holy Spirit and inspire us to do the same. To be merciful to those who doubt, for we all (those full of faith and those who have doubts) are in the hands of him who able to keep us from stumbling falling and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

And then thirdly and finally we see Mary’s response of ...

### **(3) Surrender**

*<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered.  
“May it be to me according to your word.”*

This is the model set before us. This is the example we seek to follow.

*Lord God. I do not have the full picture. I am apprehensive and fearful not knowing exactly what this all means. I have questions and doubts about how what you have said will come about. I can’t see how you will swing this. It seems impossible for me.*

*But I will look for signs that you are God who delivers on your promises. I will seek the company of those who have faith and in whom you are working. I will hurry to be with them and hang out with them.*

*I will be merciful and gracious to those who look to me to strengthen their faith and support them. I will tell my story and listen to theirs.*

*Lord I don’t see it all. I don’t have the whole picture. I realise this is all beyond what my brain can take in. But I trust you. I place my life and the lives of those near and dear to me in your hands.*

*I am your willing servant. May your will be done in my life.*

God bless Mary. She sets us an example we do well to follow.