

## **CREATE LOVE**

Aside from the baby to whom she gives birth -- the central figure of the Nativity story is Mary. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers in the faith have always cherished the role and servant heart of Mary. But, we Protestants have generally kept Mary in the theological storage room -- bringing her out for just two yearly appearances:

1. at Christmas
2. at Easter.

It is an unfortunate by-product of the Reformation that took place over half a millennia ago -- because Mary, the mother of Jesus, has much to teach us about **creating love**.

**But before we get into how each of us can follow her example**, I want to remind you that out of all the women who have ever lived -  
-- all those who came before her,  
-- and all those who followed her...

Mary was God's choice for the birth of Love. *(with a capital 'L')*

As wonderful as my own **grandmothers** were...

- God did not choose them.

As wonderful as my own **mother** is...

- God did not choose her.

As wonderful as my **god-daughter** is...

- God did not choose her.

As wonderful as **all you women here** may be...

- God did not choose you.

**God chose Mary of Nazareth, engaged to Joseph.**

As God looked down the hallways of time, God saw something in that particular person in that little town, in that small country, and decided that the Eternal Word - that was present from the beginning of creation would become flesh through that most unlikely person -- Mary.

**Now...the thing about God is...**

God gives us freedom to decide all the way through our life to say "yes" or "no" to everything.

*(Which wasn't the case for the character that Jim Carey played in the holiday film, "Yes, Man," where he says "yes" to everything).*

You see, while God choose Mary -- there was no guarantee that Mary would agree.

One of the first books I received when I first began to preach was given by my mentor, Bill Barnes, who was the chaplain for Florida Southern College, and for who I worked as his student assistant. It's called ***Peculiar Treasures, by Frederick Beuchner.***

He wrote creative, and witty, descriptions and stories about 126 Bible characters. And his daughter, Katherine, provided the pen-line illustrations.

**I've included a copy of the page in the bulletin.**

As you can see, it depicts the angel Gabriel from the back, with his fingers crossed behind him.

And Frederick Buechner writes this four sentence description of Gabriel as he delivers the message to Mary.

*She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give to her, and he gave it.*

*He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her, "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.*

*As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.*

Tradition preserves the recollection that Mary was just a teenager when all of this happened. And yet, what we take to be so extraordinary -- was quite ordinary for that time and place. It was common practice for young women to marry and give birth once they were biologically able.

**It is not Mary's age** that is so surprising in the Biblical account -

- as **it is her location in life** --- both physically and socially.

### **The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary in Nazareth.**

Now, you already know that Nazareth wasn't a very big place. But it was smaller than you probably have imagined. Historical records indicate that there were probably less than 500 inhabitants in the town -- all living in about 35 households spread over 6 acres.

Nazareth sits on a hill in the northern part of Israel. And on a clear day, one can see the Mediterranean Sea 20 miles to the west, and the Sea of Galilee 15 miles to the east. And although it was tiny, even by the ancient standards of the time, Nazareth was located along a major trade route just four miles from the city of Sepphoris -- one of the Roman-designated capitals of the Galilee region.

Today -- Nazareth stills exists -- but not Sepphoris. It is the site of a major archeological dig. But at the time, Sepphoris was a cosmopolitan, Jewish city. Sepphoris is where the son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, made his capital. Because of the all the trading that took place, Sepphoris was a city of wealth -- of tiled roofs, and beautiful mosaic floors.

Now God didn't choose a woman from Jerusalem -- where the Temple was located. However, one might assume that if God decided to go into the Galilee, he might have chosen a Jewish girl in Sepphoris, from a prominent, Jewish family. But instead, God chose a peasant girl living out in the sticks of a tiny farming community. It would kinda like God passing up Charlotte and Raleigh for Meadows.

### **So, the angel Gabriel is dispatched to Nazareth --**

-- And the very first thing he says to Mary is the very last thing that Mary's son will say to his disciples some 33 years later.

Gabriel says, **"The Lord is with you."**

Jesus says, *"I am with you."*

The one whose birth has been compared to God "moving into the neighborhood" claims that this presence of God remains.

**God is with us.**

**We are not alone.**

Thanks be to God.

And thanks be to Mary.

Now, don't get the idea that it was any easier for Mary to say "yes" to this miraculous creation of love than it would be for anyone else. The scriptures tell us that she was **perplexed, fearful, and questioning**. She had some things to ask Gabriel. And if you read the story carefully -- you will find that Gabriel doesn't exactly give Mary very specific answers to her questions about how this whole thing is going to happen.

Perhaps, he didn't have a clue, anymore than she did.

But, **he was doing his part** -- he was delivering the message.

**Delivering the baby would be Mary's part.**

And the fact that she would take the part in that when she didn't understand it all is amazing in and of itself. She simply said, "I am the servant of the Lord." -- Literally, she said, **"I am the Lord's slave."** And then she said, "Let it be to me just as you have said."

**And Gabriel immediately left her.**

**And she was alone, again.**

**And yet, not as alone as she'd been before.**

We are not told when and how the "Spirit of the Lord" came upon her. We don't know if there was some "sense" of the baby's conception in her womb.

And Gabriel doesn't show up to help Mary tell her parents -- or Joseph, the man to whom she was to be wed.

You know...despite the way we set up our Nativity sets, which always include an angel --- Mary never saw Gabriel again. Only the shepherds, outside Bethlehem were visited by the angel and the heavenly host. And Luke tells us that it was only after the angels had left them that the shepherds headed for Bethlehem to find the child.

Yet -- for the rest of her life...

-- from Jesus' childhood days...

-- through his ministry...

-- all the way to the cross and resurrection...

Mary must have repeatedly fallen back upon those first words of Gabriel, "**The Lord is with you.**"

When Jesus was separated from the family in Jerusalem, and a frantic three day search ensued, Mary was probably saying to herself, "**The Lord is with you.**"

When she tried to get Jesus -- to take him home -- only to hear him say that all who believed in him were his true family -- she was probably saying to herself, "**The Lord is with you.**"

When she learned that he had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and taken to the Roman garrison in the middle of the night, -- she was probably saying to herself, "**The Lord is with you.**"

When she saw him nailed to that cross, lifted over the crowd, and left to die, -- she was probably saying to herself, "**The Lord is with you.**"

When she saw him taken down from that cross, and hastily laid in a borrowed tomb, -- she probably said to herself, "**The Lord is with you.**"

But after her son, the Savior of the world, had been raised from the dead, and promised to be with her and everyone who believed, -- then, she knew for certain -- without an angel's message -- that indeed, the Lord **was** with her.

**Mary's gift to the world was the gift of love.**

But it came because of the sense of trust she had in a God who would be with her.  
And that is one of the gifts she gives to us.

God comes to be born among us, as one of us.

Now, we could have gone on believing in a God who was with us in some esoteric, cosmic way.  
But, God said, "I don't think that's enough. That's not enough to be able to show you how much I truly love you and desire to share my life with you."

So God became enfleshed. The Eternal, Holy God became one of us to live among us. And what a difference that makes!

For this is God who knows us...

-- who suffers with us...

...God who is fully present with us in our most joyful moments...

-- and in our most painful ones.

God comes to be with us -- in Jesus.

Mary's ability to trust and hope that God will be with her...

-- is part of the love she gives to us.

God is with us.

Emmanuel was heaven's name for the baby.

But Joseph named the baby Jesus -- which speaks of his earthly mission.

The name means, "The Lord saves."

And that is exactly what God does.

There's now nothing between us and this holy God.

Nothing that can separate us, or make us feel any distance...

God has come close to us, and closed the gap forever in Jesus.

God saved us.

And to be saved is to be healed and made whole.

-- Not just to get a ticket to heaven.

It's to be made new and live in the fullness of life that God intends for everyone of us.

But living into that fullness of life is never easy.

Sometimes, it is more difficult.

**That's why we need "Emmanuel".**

- God with us.

- God with you.

Mary shared God's love with us.

**We have been called to share God's love with others.**

And maybe the most important and wonderful thing that can be shared at Christmas -- or anytime for that matter -- are those four words from the prophet....from the angel....from the womb.

*Emmanuel* = **God is with us.**

And his name is Jesus.