

Micah 5:2-5 ² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans^[a] of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” ³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.⁵ And he will be our peace....”

Luke 1:26-45 ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^[a] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”^[b] ³⁵ The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. ³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[d] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

IN THE BOOK OF JOSHUA, AFTER GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE POSSESS THE PROMISED LAND, THEY ARE CHALLENGED TO CHOSE TO SERVE THE LORD THEIR GOD WHO SAVED THEM, AND DELIVERED THE LAND INTO THEIR HANDS.

CHOOSING GOD, WHO HAS CREATED US, LOVES US, AND REDEEMS US IS ON ONGOING BIBLICAL THEME.

THE PROPHET MICAH DELIVERED A MESSAGE TO A PEOPLE WHO HAD LITTLE HOPE FOR THEIR FUTURE, THAT THEY CAN AND SHOULD PUT THEIR HOPE IN GOD.

WE UNDERSTAND, THAT ON ONE LEVEL, HIS MESSAGE WAS MOST LIKELY POINTING TO THE BIRTH OR CORONATION OF A NEW KING.

AND YET HIS MESSAGE GOES FAR BEYOND THE TIME AND PLACE OF THOSE WHO FIRST RECEIVED GOD’S WORD THROUGH HIM.

THE MESSAGE ALSO CONCERNS THE CHOICE OF THE MANNER OF SALVATION GOD WOULD BRING INTO THE WORLD.

CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND THE PROPHET’S WORDS ULTIMATELY POINT TO JESUS, WHO IN FACT FULFILLED THEM.

NOTICE ALSO, GOD NOT ONLY CHOSE THE MANNER OF SALVATION THROUGH THE INCARNATION, BUT THE PLACE OF CHRIST’S BIRTH AS WELL.

MICAH CALLS US TO LOOK AT THE LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM, LARGELY FORGOTTEN AND UNIMPORTANT SO LONG AFTER KING DAVID’S DEATH.

THE PROPHET AFFIRMS THE VALUE OF ROLE BETHLEHEM, HAD IN THE FULFILLMENT OF PART OF GOD’S PLAN. YES, BETHLEHEM, ONCE KNOWN ONLY AS THE CITY OF DAVID IS NOW MOST FAMOUS AS THE BIRTH PLACE, NOT OF DAVID, BUT OF JESUS.

HOW BLESSED IS THE LITTLE TOWN BECAUSE IT WAS CHOSEN FOR ITS SPECIAL TASK OF CHRIST’S BIRTHPLACE.

AND YET, BETHLEHEM IS NOT A LIVING CREATURE, IT HAD NO AWARENESS OF BEING CHOSEN, NOR ANY ABILITY TO ACCEPT OR REJECT GOD'S WILL.

THIS, OF COURSE, WAS NOT THE CASE WITH MARY. WE OFTEN ASSUME GABRIEL'S MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED BY MARY AS A FOREGONE CONCLUSION, SOMETHING SHE HAD NO SAY IN.

BUT REMEMBER, GOD DOES NOT VIOLATE THE FREE WILL HE ESTABLISHED WITHIN EVERY HUMAN BEING.

THE LORD MAY GIVE WARNINGS, MAKE PROMISES OF BLESSINGS, EVEN COMMANDS -BUT GOD DOES NOT TAKE OVER OUR HEARTS AND MINDS UNLESS WE ALLOW IT.

THEREFORE, MARY INDEED HAD A CHOICE. AND EVEN IF IT WAS UNLIKELY SHE WOULD HAVE SAID NO, BECAUSE GOD SURELY CHOSE HER, IN PART, BECAUSE SHE WAS OPEN TO HIS WILL, SHE COULD HAVE REJECTED BEING CHOSEN.

A MAN NAMED HERBERT O'DRISCOLL WROTE ABOUT A CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE HE HAD THAT ADDRESSES MARY AND HER CHOOSING TO BE CHOSEN.

HE EXPLAINED THAT AS A BOY A MAN WHO WORKED AS A FARMHAND ON HIS GRANDFATHER'S FARM OFTEN SPOKE WITH HIM AND TOLD HIM MANY STORIES.

ONE SUMMER'S NIGHT HE TOLD HERBERT TO LOOK UP AT THE STAR FILLED SKY. AND HE ASKED: "DO YOU KNOW THE STARS AND MOON AND SUN MOVE ALL THE TIME?"

THE BOY REPLIED THAT HE DID KNOW THAT. THE MAN THEN ASKED IF HE HAD HEARD THE STORY ABOUT THE ANGEL GABRIEL SPEAKING WITH MARY, AND TELLING HER GOD WANTED HER TO HAVE A CHILD, HIS SON?

AGAIN, HERBERT SAID HE KNEW THE STORY. THE FARMHAND THEN ASKED HIM:

"DO YOU KNOW THAT WHEN THE ANGEL ASKED MARY IF SHE WOULD BEAR THE HOLY CHILD, ALL THE STARS AND THE SUN AND THE MOON STOPPED MOVING UNTIL SHE SAID YES?"

THE STORY, OF COURSE, HAS NO BASIS IN THE BIBLE, BUT IT DOES MAKE THE POINT THAT MARY DID HAVE A CHOICE.

HER DECLARATION: "HERE I AM, LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD", IS OFTEN SEEN AS BEING A PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S WILL.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT THIS. MARY, IN A WAY WAS LIKE A WARRIOR CALLED ON A SPECIAL MISSION FOR WHICH SHE WAS UNIQUELY SUITED.

THE PASSAGE REMINDS ME A LITTLE OF THE OLD TV SERIES "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE", WHEN THE AGENTS WERE GIVEN A CHOICE TO GO ON THE MISSION OR NOT.

THE FAMOUS WORDS OF THE SERIES AND LATER THE MOVIES WAS: "YOUR MISSION, IF YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT IS...."

AND THEOLOGICALLY, MARY'S WORDS "HERE I AM, LET IT BE"- ALSO ECHO THOSE OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH WHO HEARD GOD'S CALL.

IN HIS VISION ISAIAH HEARD GOD ASK: "WHOM SHALL WE SEND? AND HE REPLIED: "HERE I AM, SEND ME."

REV. BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR REFLECTED ON MARY'S CALL AND RESPONSE AND WROTE THIS:

"MARY WINS HER PLACE IN HISTORY NOT FOR CLEVERNESS, NOR FOR BEAUTY, NOR EVEN FOR HER GOODNESS.

SHE BECOMES THE MOST IMPORTANT WOMAN IN THE WORLD SIMPLY BECAUSE SHE IS WILLING TO SAY YES TO AN ANGEL'S STRANGE PROPOSAL WITH OUT A CLUE WHERE IT WILL LEAD HER.

DOING SO, SHE BECOMES THE PROTOTYPE FOR ALL OF US WHO ARE INVITED TO BEAR GOD INTO THE WORLD."

INDEED, ALL CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED AND EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TO BRING JESUS BOTH HOME WITH US AND OUT INTO THE WORLD FOR OTHERS TO MEET.

WE ARE ALL, IN A SPIRITUAL WAY, NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM MARY, WHO HEARD AND ACCEPTED GOD CHOOSING HER.

GOD CHOOSES US TO BE THE VEHICLES TO CARRY JESUS IN OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS- BEING HIS BODY IN THE WORLD, BY LIVING OUT OUR FAITH IN HIM.

THEREFORE, WE CAN LEARN SOME THINGS FROM WHAT MARY DID AFTER THE ANGEL LEFT HER TO PONDER AND LIVE OUT HER CALLING.

THE FIRST THING WE SHOULD NOTICE ABOUT BEING CHOSEN BY GOD IS THAT MARY IS GIVEN INFORMATION TO POINT HER IN A CERTAIN DIRECTION BUT NOT TOLD WHAT TO DO.

FOR EXAMPLE, GABRIEL MENTIONS HER COUSIN ELIZABETH, FOR WHOM IT HAD BEEN IMPOSSIBLE TO CONCEIVE A CHILD, IS NOW PREGNANT BY THE WILL OF GOD

MARY, IS NOT, TOLD TO GO TO SEE ELIZABETH. SHE IS GIVEN NO INSTRUCTION ABOUT WHEN OR HOW OR WHAT TO TELL HER PARENTS OR JOSPEPH WHOM SHE IS PLEDGED TO MARRY.

THIS IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM WHAT WE MAY EXPERIENCE WHEN WE FEEL CALLED TO A TASK BY GOD. THERE IS NO ROAD MAP OR BLUE PRINT TO PROVIDE A STEP-BY-STEP PLAN.

WE LIKE MARY, ARE USUALLY LEFT TO FIGURE THINGS OUT, AT LEAST TO SOME DEGREE, ON OUR OWN.

HOPEFULLY WE WILL DO SO WITH PRAYER, BUT ALSO IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO FIND ANOTHER HUMAN BEING WHO MIGHT OFFER SUPPORT OR ADVICE.

THIS IS WHAT MARY DOES SOON AFTER THE ANGEL LEFT HER. SHE TRAVELED TO THE HOME OF ZECHARIAH AND HER COUSIN ELIZABETH.

AFTER ALL, IF ANYONE IN THE WORLD, MIGHT BE ABLE TO BELIEVE AND UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS LIKE TO RECEIVE A BLESSING YOU CAN'T REALLY EXPLAIN-IT WOULD BE ELIZABETH, WHO WAS ALSO BLESSED BY GOD.

THEN, WHEN SHE ARRIVES AT HER KINSWOMAN'S HOME, EVEN BEFORE SHE CAN EXPLAIN HER REASON FOR COMING- ELIZABETH IS TOLD BY THE HOLY SPIRIT ABOUT MARY BEING WITH CHILD THROUGH THE POWER AND WILL OF GOD.

THE OLDER WOMAN'S WORDS OFFER A CONFIRMATION OF WHAT MARY THOUGHT SHE HEARD THE ANGEL SAY.

ELZABETH BLESSES MARY FOR BEING CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE THE MOTHER OF THE LORD, AND FOR BELIEVING AND ACCEPTING GOD'S WORD TO HER.

HOWEVER, MARY'S BLESSEDNESS DOES NOT MEAN HER ROLE AS THE MOTHER OF JESUS WOULD BE EASY, OR THAT EVERYTHING WOULD GO SMOOTHLY.

WE ALREADY KNOW THE STORY, SHE AND JOSEPH COULD NOT FIND A GOOD PLACE TO STAY IN BETHLEHEM, AND HAD TO SETTLE FOR A STABLE.

HERE ALSO WE ARE SHOWN THAT BEING BLESSED BY GOD IN OUR LIVES IS NOT A GUARANTEE OF SMOOTH SAILING OR THINGS ALWAYS WORKING OUT IN WAYS WE LIKE.

INSTEAD, BLESSINGS ARE A REMINDER THAT GOD IS WITH US AND IS PRESENT TO HELP US, BUT THEY ARE NOT MEANT CLEAR AWAY ALL OBSTACLES OR TROUBLES.

OUR CHALLENGE, LIKE THOSE CHOSEN BY GOD BEFORE US, IS TO CONTINUE TO TRUST IN THE LORD WHEN THINGS DO NOT GO WELL.

BOTH ELIZABETH AND MARY WERE OPEN TO THE SPIRIT IN DIFFERENT WAYS, BUT EACH TRUSTED IN THE LORD, TO HELP THEM FULFILL THEIR ROLES IN HIS PLAN.

ELIZABETH LISTENED WHEN THE SPIRIT SPOKE TO HER ABOUT MARY, THEN SHE OFFERED GOD'S WORD OF REASSURANCE TO THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

MARY WAS OPEN TO BEING OVERSHADOWED BY THE SPIRIT TO MIRACULOSLY CONCEIVE GOD'S SON WITHIN HER.

WE ALSO ARE GIVEN DIFFERENT SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND INSIGHT, BUT CAN ONLY RECEIVE THOSE THINGS WHEN WE ARE OPEN TO THE LORD.

AND WHILE WE ALL EXPERIENCE MAJOR, EVEN LIFE CHANGING EVENTS, LIFE IS MADE UP MOSTLY OF THE LITTLE THINGS, WHICH WHEN PUT TOGETHER PAINT THE BIGGER PICTURE OF OUR LIVES.

THEREFORE, THE SMALL WAYS WE SERVE GOD AND LIVE OUT OUR CALLING AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE IMPORTANT.

MANY OF THE STORIES ABOUT JESUS POINT TO HOW PEOPLE MADE A SPUR OF THE MOMENT CHOICE THAT WAS A MINOR ONE AND YET WAS IMPORTANT.

FOR EXAMPLE, IN LUKE 10:38-41 WE ARE TOLD THE STORY ABOUT JESUS VISITING LAZARUS AND HIS SISTERS MARY AND MARTHA.

MARTHA CHOSE TO DO HER EXPECTED DUTIES TO PREPARE AND SERVE A MEAL TO HONOR JESUS. MARY CHOSE TO SIT AT JESUS' FEET AND LISTEN TO WHAT HE WAS SAYING.

NEITHER CHOICE WAS SINFUL-BOTH CHOICES WERE DEMONSTRATIONS OF LOVE FOR JESUS.

BUT WHEN MARTHA GOT UPSET WITH MARY BECAUSE SHE WAS LEFT TO DO EVERYTHING ALONE- JESUS HONORED MARY'S CHOICE.

HE DID NOT, HOWEVER, SAY MARTHA MADE A BAD CHOICE, ONLY SUGGESTED MARY'S WAS THE BETTER ONE ON THAT DAY.

WE TOO MAKE MANY OF THESE KINDS OF CHOICES ALL OF THE TIME, CONSCIOUSLY AND UNCONSCIOUSLY.

WE EVEN MAKE CHOICES ABOUT HOW TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS EACH YEAR. THESE ARE MOSTLY SMALL THINGS BUT THEY CAN IMPACT HOW WE EXPERIENCE CHRISTMAS.

A WOMAN NAMED LOUISE TEISBERG WROTE A POEM ABOUT CHOOSING TO REMEMBER,, OR NOT THE REAL MEANING OF THE SEASON. THE POEM ALSO REMINDS ME A LITTLE ABOUT THE STORY OF JESUS, MARY, AND MARTHA. THE POEM SAYS:

“WHEN JESUS CALLED THAT CHRISTMAS WEEK I WASN'T AT MY BEST; AND THE HOUSE WAS MUCH TOO CLUTTERED TO ENTERTAIN A GUEST.

HE SEEMED TO NOTICE EVERYTHING, THE CARDS STILL UNADDRESSED, THE GIFTS PILED HIGH AWAITING WRAPS, THE BAKING AND THE REST.

HE EYES FELL ON THE EVERGREEN AND THE PRESENTS 'NEATH THE TREE, IT'S MY BIRTHDAY THAT YOU CELEBRATE--WHAT ARE YOU GIVING ME?

'WHAT AM I GIVING HIM?' I THOUGHT; ASHAMED NO WORDS I FOUND. SO MANY COSTLY THINGS I'D BOUGHT, HE LOOKED AT ME AND FROWNED.

I PRAYED HE'D LET THE QUESTION PASS, BUT WHEN HE DID PERSIST, I BLURTED OUT THE TRUTH AT LAST, YOU WERE NOT ON MY LIST.”

JESUS CALLS US TO PUT HIM FIRST ON OUR LIST, SO THAT ALL THE GIFTS WE GIVE AND RECEIVE POINT TO US TO HIM. AND WHAT DOES JESUS WANT?

FIRST, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, HE DESIRES WE ALLOW HIM TO SAVE US. SECONDLY, HE DESIRE WE CHOOSE TO LET HIM TRANSFORM US FROM WITHIN BY BEING OPEN TO LOVE, AND OTHER GIFTS AND FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

FINALLY, HE DESIRES WE SHARE HIS LOVE IN WORD AND DEED NOT JUST ON HIS BIRTHDAY BUT EVERYDAY.

ONE OF THE LINES OF A CHRISTMAS HYMN OFFERS THIS PRAYER TO HELP US GIVE TO JESUS WHAT HE DESIRES: “O HOLY CHILD OF BETHLEHEM DESCEND TO US WE PRAY; CAST OUT OUR SIN AND ENTER IN, BE BORN IN US TODAY.”

LET ALL THOSE WHO CELEBRATE CHISTMAS SAY- AMEN.

SERMON SUMMARY: LUKE 1:26-45

WE OFTEN ASSUME GABRIEL'S MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED BY MARY AS A FOREGONE CONCLUSION, SOMETHING SHE HAD NO SAY IN. BUT REMEMBER, GOD DOES NOT VIOLATE THE FREE WILL HE ESTABLISHED WITHIN EVERY HUMAN BEING. THE LORD MAY GIVE WARNINGS, MAKE PROMISES OF BLESSINGS, EVEN COMMANDS -BUT GOD DOES NOT TAKE OVER OUR HEARTS AND MINDS UNLESS WE ALLOW IT.

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