

Mary, Model Hearer of God's Word
A Mid-week Advent Sermon

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

When Moses was called to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, YHWH told him, "Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:10) Moses, perhaps the greatest person in the history of the Old Testament, responds with excuses. God spoke to Moses, and Moses lists off reasons why that Word cannot be.

- "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11)
- "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13)
- "But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" (Exodus 4:1)
- "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10)
- "O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send." (Exodus 4:13)

Finally, Moses is convinced to do what the Word of God commanded Him to do.

When the prophet Ezekiel was called to proclaim the justice of God to the people of Israel, it almost seems as if he had to be convinced by vision of heaven unlike anything described elsewhere in the Scriptures, spare the Revelation given to St. John. After the frightening vision, showcasing the might and majesty of God over creation, YHWH tells the priest,

Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. For they are impudent and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD." As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse—for they are a rebellious house—yet they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house. You shall speak My words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are rebellious. But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. (Ezekiel 2:3-8)

Rather than just being told what he was going to do and going, one can read the vision as being that little extra nudge that Ezekiel needed to heed the Word of God.

And there's Jonah—obstinate Jonah. This prophet was told to go to the land of Nineveh and proclaim the judgment of God to the people there: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." (Jonah 1:2) What does Jonah do instead? He flees to Tarshish, as if to hide from God, perhaps in the hopes that God would send someone else to Nineveh instead. But God had none of it. A great storm arose and tossed the boat on which Jonah had booked passage. Knowing that he was the cause of the boat's problems, he pleads with the crew to throw him overboard, which they finally do. "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17) After being vomited by the fish, Jonah makes his way to Nineveh, proclaims the Word of God there, and the city repents, much to Jonah's surprise and dismay.

What about Zecharias? Here is a priest, no less, someone who should know the Word of God when it comes to him, one would think. He is well advanced in years, but childless; his wife Elizabeth is

barren. It was his turn to serve in the temple, and as he was doing so, the archangel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that Elizabeth is pregnant. "You will call his name John." (Luke 1:13) The priest asks, "How shall I know this?" He gives excuses how this cannot be: "I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." (Luke 1:18) You can almost hear him scoffing and mocking the angel. For not believing the Word of God sent to him, Zecharias is made a mute until he names his son John.

We could add more people from the Scriptures—prophets, kings, disciples, apostles, evangelists, ordinary folks—everyone to whom the Word of God was proclaimed. To a person, they all dealt with another voice in the back of their heads, a competing voice which sought to doubt the Word of God, not heed what it tells them, not believe what it says, put God to the test. "This is a hard saying," they all could say, "who can understand it?" (John 6:60) Nevertheless, when God has in mind to declare His Word to people, His Word will have the final say and way. Moses went to Pharaoh. Ezekiel went to the people of Israel. Jonah went to Nineveh. Zecharias named his son John.

Then there's you, and every hearer of God's Word to this day. I suppose there's a measure of comfort in knowing that you're no different than every prophet, priest, king, disciple, apostle, and evangelist that has gone before you. "The Word of God says what?" It says that you must do what the Law commands or you deserve to die. It says that God Himself has come among you, in the flesh, and done what the Law demands as well as taken your punishment upon Himself. For that—for His sake—it says that you are forgiven. It says that you are joined to the work of the Christ—even His very death and resurrection—by way of Holy Baptism. It says that a morsel of bread and a sip of wine are the very body and blood of the Christ given and shed for you.

And what do you say? "How can this be? There's no way this can be!" "I try my hardest; God has to recognize that." "I don't feel forgiven." "It looks like ordinary water." "It tastes like ordinary bread and wine." "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"

I suppose you can count yourself fortunate—perhaps blessed is a better word—that you don't see or hear God's anger fume against you. You aren't given a first-hand, frightening vision of eternity. You aren't made to spend three days in the belly of a great fish. You aren't made a mute. You aren't given to hear the rebuke from the lips of Jesus, "Do you also want to go away?" (John 6:67) No, you are blessed not to receive any of that, and more, and worse, because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, has received it all in your place.

About six months after Zecharias received his angelic visitor, Gabriel visits a young maiden in the little town of Nazareth. He speaks to her: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28) In that moment—"The Lord is with you"—the Son of God is incarnate, the Son of Man. Gabriel's greeting frightens Mary.

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:30-33)

Now, here's the tricky part, because Mary asks a question. "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Given what has happened previously, especially with Zecharias just six months previous, this question must be heard not incredulously, but curiously. It's as if the maiden says, "Help me to understand how this is going to happen." "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35) And Mary gives that reply by which we now call her the model hearer of God's Word: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

There was no string of rational arguments against a preposterous claim. There were no scoffs and mockery at what seems irrational and crazy to the human mind, even to hers. Mary simply

acknowledges her place as a servant of the Lord.

And it must be said that this reply did not come to her from flesh and blood, at least as we most often use that phrase. As much as St. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God was not revealed to him by flesh and blood (cf. Matthew 16:15-17), that is, from within himself, so Mary's reply did not come from her own person, but because she carried the very Son of God in the flesh in her own womb. Her reply was given to her from flesh and blood, but it was the very flesh and blood of God incarnate within her, whom she would name Jesus.

This reply demonstrates that Mary being the very model hearer of God's Word is all about the Word of God which now resides in her. Merely a clump of cells, the living God is become man, and by the power and indwelling of the Almighty Creator of the stars of night, Mary gave answer that serves as an example you pray to God in order to emulate: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."

Her Son would grow into the model hearer of God's Word, too. Of course He would; He is the very Word of God. As it happened, though, every part of the Word which demanded that you do something (which you by fallen nature do not do), Jesus did; and every part of the Word which demanded your life for not doing what the Word of God demanded of you, Jesus suffered in your place. Even as He looked death in the eye, Jesus prayed that the cup would be removed from Him, but as He gave answer to His mother before Him, so He also says, "[N]evertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." (Luke 22:42)

Upon the cross, Mary's Son bore the sin of the world. And if He bore the sin of the world, then He bore your sin, too, dear hearer. Beaten to within an inch of His life, crowned with thorns, and nailed to a cross, Jesus shed His blood as your propitiation—as your redemption. By His death, you have been bought back from death to life. And to seal this redemption to you, He rose again from the dead.

Into this, into Jesus, you are Baptized—you are Baptized as a part of the Bride of Christ, forever joined to her Bridegroom and His death and resurrection. By way of this Baptism, you have the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the same God that now dwells in you that once by way of flesh and blood—a mere clump of cells and infant—dwelt in Mary, the model hearer of God's Word, and He does things to you.

Now, to you is proclaimed the Word of God.

- You hear the Law of God and it's demands to do right by God and neighbor, and it accuses you of not doing right by God and neighbor. Your flesh screams out that it tries, but the New Man worked in you by the water and the Word, by the gift of the Holy Spirit says, "Yes, yes, it is so."
- You hear the Gospel declaring to you the free forgiveness for the sake of Christ, giving it to you, making it yours and making you the righteousness of God in Christ. Your flesh mocks, "I don't feel forgiven," but the New Man worked in you by the water and the Word, by the gift of the Holy Spirit says, "Yes, yes, it is so."
- You take into your mouths a piece of bread and a little wine and you hear the man of God tell you that it is the body and blood of Christ for you. Your flesh scoffs, "It tastes only like bread and wine," but the New Man worked in you by the water and the Word, by the gift of the Holy Spirit says, "Yes, yes, it is so."

And so for you, by way of the Son of God that she carries, Mary is for you the model hearer of God's Word. God speaks, you hear, you believe, and you confess with her, "I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word." That Word says to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins. "Yes, yes, it is so!"

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.