

MARY: A MODEL OF FAITH & FAITHFULNESS

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

Mary is a very misunderstood woman. The Papalists want to turn her into the 4th person of the Holy Trinity, and the fundamentalists want to make her as insignificant as possible in reaction to the Papalists. Neither of these is an option for the confessional Lutheran. Mary is not to be worshipped and prayed to; that would be idolatry. Nor is she to be belittled just so we can show how Protestant we are. Yes, she was a sinner saved by grace like us. Yet, the Bible speaks of her in very respectful terms. The angel Gabriel calls her, "Highly favored," telling her she is "blessed among women". This honorable term is repeated by Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who also refers to Mary as, "the mother of my Lord." In the first chapter of Acts she is singled out from the other women among the disciples and referred to as, "Mary the mother of Jesus." (Luke 1:28,42,43; Acts 1:14) She is honored because of the things that our gracious God did through her, with the result that her life is a fine example of faith and faithfulness for Christians.

When we first encounter Mary in the Scriptures, we learn that she was from Nazareth in Galilee, that she was of the house of David, and that she was a virgin espoused to a man named Joseph. The word 'virgin' is repeated twice (Luke 1:26,27). Now all of these facts about her are meant to show that the prophecies in the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah were being truly fulfilled in every detail with the conception and birth of Jesus. Mary is the virgin of the house of David prophesied in Isaiah 7:14; her Son is 'Immanuel, God with us'. But she is a virgin, not only because Scripture is being fulfilled in her life, but also because she was a believer in the Lord who has remained chaste in obedience to the Word of God. This is a very important thing to mention today when popular culture tells us that the only prohibition regarding sex is that it be 'safe sex'. Mary is a model of Christian chastity. She is a young woman who is engaged, and she is a virgin. Countless lives have been ruined in our day because people have cast aside God's revealed will about the right and wrong use of sex. Mary's faith in the Lord moved her to faithfulness in living a chaste and decent life in word and deed, and in this she is a fine example for us.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to be the mother of Christ the Son of God, whom she is to name 'Jesus'. Now that is quite a bit to take in, especially if you are an ordinary girl in a backwater town out in the sticks. And yet, Mary did not doubt the Word of God; she said, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" This is not doubt or unbelief as in the case of Zacharias (Luke 1:18-20), but rather faith seeking understanding. She wanted to understand, and Gabriel obliged her by explaining that she would conceive by the Holy Ghost and bear the Son of God because with God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:28-37), thus confirming and strengthening her faith. In this fallen world Christians are continually tempted to doubt or disbelieve the Word of God. We feel pressure from the world which hates the Word, and we feel pressure from our own human reason, which in its fallen state, is all too susceptible to Satanic deception and attack. Mary believed the Word of God and sought greater understanding. That greater understanding also came from the Word of God, resulting in greater confidence in God and willingness to serve the Lord according to His will (Luke 1:37,38). Here, Mary is a model of faith rejecting doubt and unbelief, and seeking understanding in the Word of God. And it is important to note that the Word which Mary trusts and is nourished by is the Word which is centered in Christ and what God was doing for the world through Him. God's Word is not just rules, laws and maxims; it is the revelation of God's Plan of Salvation brought to completion in Jesus Christ, inviting us to faith.

When the angel Gabriel had finished his annunciation, Mary responded with the words: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). The Lord has given her a great honor, but an honor accompanied by the prospect of hardship, crossbearing, and suffering. These tribulations first manifest themselves in the disbelief of Joseph regarding the source of her pregnancy. He wanted to end their espousal quietly without making her a public example because he was faced with a pregnancy that he wasn't responsible for. It was only after the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and assured him of the divine conception in the womb of Mary that Joseph took her to be his wife. Amid all this potential heartbreak and shame, Mary trusted the Word and let the Lord be her defense and help. She was not disappointed.

Late in her pregnancy, It was necessary for Mary and Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the census of Augustus. Since they were both descendents of David, they had to register in David's ancestral town. We are not told whether they had a donkey for her to ride on or whether they both walked on foot. Either way it was a rough and dangerous journey, especially with Mary so close to giving birth. Then, after a long and difficult trip, the holy family had to find shelter in a barn of some kind because there were no other lodgings available. So Mary gave birth to Jesus surrounded by animals, feed and tools, and made a temporary crib out of a nearby feedbox (Luke 2:1-7). All of this was surely a difficult time for Mary (and Joseph). Yet she trusted in the Lord who brought His Word to pass and blessed and kept her through it all.

But there is more. After the visit of the wise men, the Lord told Joseph to take Mary and the Baby and flee to Egypt because King Herod was seeking to kill the child. So, after the difficulties surrounding Christ's birth, and just when things were apparently settling down, the holy family were compelled to flee as refugees to Egypt and live there until it was safe to return to Israel (Matthew 2:13-23). Again, this was a dangerous and troubling time, especially for people of limited means and influence. But God used these events in His providential care of Mary and the family, and Mary was sustained throughout by the Word of the Lord which comforts and strengthens believers. How often haven't we felt overwhelmed by life's circumstances, when it appeared as if one thing after another was going wrong, and when one challenge met only seems to give rise to another? Our anchor in these times is the Word and promise of the Lord who keeps us in Christ. Faith in Christ enables faithfulness in trying circumstances. And the Lord always sees us through!

When Jesus was 12 years old the family went to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover celebrations there. On the way home Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus was not with them. After a thorough search, they hurried back to Jerusalem to search for Jesus there, finding Him after three days of frantic searching (Luke 2:41-52). You can imagine Mary and Joseph's concern! Yet even here, the Lord worked all things according to His plan and Jesus' parents were reminded in a powerful way that their son was God's Son. It is the saving love of God in Christ our Savior that enables faith even in the most trying of times.

We have seen how faith in God's promises fulfilled in Christ enabled Mary to be faithful even through trying times. There is yet another way that Mary is an example of Christian faith and faithfulness. After we are told of the visit of the shepherds to the Babe in the manger, Luke tells us, "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Again, after Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple after three days' searching, we are told, "But his mother kept all these sayings in her heart" (Luke 2:51). These words give us a picture of Mary as a thoughtful, reflective, meditative, devotional believer. She was not one to let the significance of events in the salvation story escape her. She internalized them; she pondered them; she retained them. We live in an age where it seems that even apparently devout Christians have learned the fine art of letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. It is all too common today to see Christians confess the truth of the Word in church or Bible class, and then act like they've never

heard it when called upon to act upon it in concrete circumstances. There are more and easier ways to hear and learn the faith today than ever before and yet we live in a new 'Dark Ages' with respect to knowledge of God. We need a faith like Mary's which faithfully meditates on, ponders, and retains the Word of God so that we trust it and live it in our daily lives.

It was this hiding of the Word in her heart that helped Mary to know who to trust and to turn to, even in a seemingly mundane thing like running out of wine at a wedding in Cana (John 2). She turned to Jesus. And while the miracle at Cana is a powerful witness to the presence of God in the person of Christ, it also serves to remind us that we may trust in the Lord not only in the "big, important things," but in all things. Whatever our need, let us turn to Jesus. He has given us His kingdom and righteousness; will he turn a deaf ear to our temporal needs? But Mary's biggest trial was still to come. She was to witness the rejection, suffering, crucifixion, death and burial of her son. Many people have been sorely tempted to reject God in the wake of the loss of a child. It is one of the saddest things we can experience. And this loss was magnified for Mary almost beyond belief by the awful circumstances attending Christ's death. Old Simeon, even amid the joys of the nativity, had warned her: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35). Yet, when all is said and done, after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, Mary is still numbered among the believers in Acts 1. After listing the 11 apostles, Luke says, "these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (vs. 14). The devil had thrown everything he could at her, and she was still standing; still numbered among the believers. Why? Because she had the Word of God centering in Jesus Christ securely hidden in her heart, and through that Word she was sustained in faith. She wasn't exempted from sorrow, but she was kept and sustained through it. Through that Word she was able to trust God's saving purposes in the Passion of Christ. When we are filled with sorrow we should remember that through Christ's suffering and death God has wrought full salvation for all. Surely, therefore, He can work out His good purposes, even in our greatest trials, enabling us to say, "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Christ's life was not a tragedy but a comedy, ending, not with death and failure, but with resurrection, vindication, ascension and hope. The life of one who persists in unbelief is a tragedy, ending in death and damnation. But the life of the believer, though it is beset by many trials, crosses, and much suffering, is nevertheless a comedy. The last word about us is not death, but life, vindication and glory forever through Christ, who for us died and rose again. Mary hid this Word of hope and victory through Christ in her heart and remained steadfast in faith. We honor her, not when we worship her like the Papalists, nor when we belittle her with the fundamentalists, but when we follow her example of faith and faithfulness centered in God's Word in Christ.