

December 21, 2014

Real-Life Faith

Luke 1:26-38

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The mother of Jesus – the virgin Mary – makes an appearance once a year in my home. Here she is, a figurine from our nativity scene.

And every year, our Lord's mother appears three times here at Hope: 1 & 2, from our crèche sets under the trees; and, 3, a wooden cutout Mary from our Living Nativity stable out in the circle drive.

The virgin Mary may not make a live, in-the-flesh appearance in our church; but, when it comes to **figurines and cutouts, we've** got her covered!

Actually, Mary makes a fourth appearance today. She appears in the written Word, in our Bible story for today.

So we read about Mary, we look at figurines and statues **and cutouts of Mary; but I'm sure we all understand that** these are not the real-life Mary. Nor do the letters M-A-R-Y on this page of the Bible constitute the real-life Mary.

No, Mary was a real, live person, when the angel visited her home. And she had a real, live reaction of fear and trepidation – like any one of us would have – when that heavenly messenger suddenly appeared in front of her, and started talking about some crazy things. Mary had real, live doubts and reservations as she tried to make **sense of the angel's words.**

“He’s calling me, ‘O favored one’? The angel’s telling me, ‘The Lord is with you!’ He’s saying that I’ve found favor with God? What did I do? How could I, a sinful human being, find favor with God? And now he’s announcing that I’m going to have a baby boy? I don’t think so! I’m not even married! I’ve never been with a man! That’s impossible! And next the angel declares that my baby boy is going to be the Son of God, an eternal ruler? This is all unbelievable!”

Did Mary have these exact real-life responses? **We don’t** know for sure. But Mary was a real-life person; and she absolutely had some real-life qualms and concerns when **God’s angel messenger laid out God’s plan for her.**

Luke 1:34 describes it. **“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’”**

If God sent an angel to say that you were going to be the next President of the United States – or that you were going to cure cancer, or that you were going to solve all of the fighting in the Middle East – you might have some real-life qualms and concerns, just like Mary did. I know I would.

I think we all would. I think we all do. God may not be asking you or me to do gigantic, miraculous, impossible things; but God is always challenging us, inviting us, trying to include real-life people like us in his plans.

“I have a plan,” God may be saying, **“to get connected with one of your neighbors, who doesn’t know anything about Jesus. And I want you to be part of that plan. I’m asking you to be a witness, share a message, be my instrument.”** **That’s a real-life situation, isn’t it?** That could

very well be something God is saying to you these days. How do you respond?

“I have another plan,” God may be saying to you, “to help all the children here at Hope learn all about Jesus. And I’m looking for a good Sunday School teacher, or helper, or a Children’s Church leader, or a Confirmation small group leader. I think you fit the bill!” Could that be a real-life invitation from God to you? Is God working on that level in our congregation?

You bet he is! God had a plan for Mary, and God has a plan for each and every one of us. He wants to include all of us, and utilize all of us – each according to our God-given gifts and abilities, each in our own unique, singular way. God has plans for this church, plans for the people in this community, plans for the needy and the impoverished, plans for the sick and the elderly, plans for the kids and the youth, plans for your neighbors and mine. **How do you respond to God’s invitations, God’s challenges?**

The Lord may not send the angel Gabriel down to us to recruit us, like he did Mary. He might. But, even if he **doesn’t do that, the Bible makes it crystal clear that God** wants every one of us involved, participating in his plans to bring the Good News of Christ to all the world.

How do you respond to that? **God says, “Get involved! Share your time and talents! Support the Lord’s work! Embrace Christ’s mission, and discover your mission!”** Those are real-life challenges, my friends, real-life invitations from our God. How do you respond?

You don't have to be super-qualified to participate. You need not be saintly and holy and perfect to be on God's team. Mary wasn't. I'm not. Pastor Lineberger over there isn't. We're all sinners. We're all imperfect before God. We all make mistakes, and rebel, and disobey our God. **We all come up short, every day. We're all epic spiritual failures, when it comes down to it.**

But that is why the Son of God came down to us. That's precisely why Jesus was born. That's the entire reason that God's plan was unfolding: in Nazareth, where Mary's role in the plan was announced; in Bethlehem, where the Christ Child was born in human flesh; in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified for our sins; and right here in Wake Forest, where this very day God offers grace, forgiveness, and peace to real-life people who believe and trust in Jesus – to us.

And all he asks from us, friends, is faith. Just faith. Real-life faith. Believe in what God is offering you today. Trust in the Christmas story, and what God did for you by sending a Savior. **Have faith in Christ's love. Have faith in Christ's cross. Have faith in Christ's personal invitation to you to follow him, to walk with him, to participate in his mission plan.**

Look again at Mary – the real-life Mary. She was challenged, she was bewildered, she knew what the angel was saying was impossible. But, in the end, Mary responded with real-life faith: **“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”**

Whatever God is calling you to do -- whatever real-life message or real-life challenge the Lord is sending you – respond, like Mary, with real-life faith. Amen.

