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Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life's Biggest Questions
The Courage of Mary
Luke 1:26-45
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INTRODUCTION

If you have not yet read Timothy Keller's book, *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life's Biggest Questions*, I highly recommend it! It is full of rich, insightful information. I learned many exciting, life-changing details about Jesus in this book that made His humanity even more vibrant to me.

As we know from the reading, Mary has a supernatural experience in her young life. She is visited by an angel and is presented with a calling on her life. She fulfilled God's purpose for her life because she said "yes" to her calling. A calling can be an occupation, but it is more often something separate.

What is Tim Keller's point in this chapter of *Encounters with Jesus*?

He examines her *response* to God. Her response is how we see her courage.

So, in this Luke passage, we are going to look at the three steps Mary took and observe how she handled them and how we handle them. The three steps are:

- Listening
- Trusting
- Surrendering

These three things led to her courage and her ability to be such a remarkable role model for us. So we will look at how these three things combined, are related to God's call on Mary's life. He had a calling for Mary and He has a calling for each of us.

Regardless of our gender, age, or stage in life, we all have a role to play in God's Kingdom.

It is important because you are important. You have a role. You have an assignment. Everyone who is alive is "still on the payroll." If you think that your assignment is over or that you failed an assignment, or that God doesn't care, that's probably not true. If you feel as if you haven't heard from the Lord in a while, don't think He's lost your file.

Now, Mary's call or assignment was to be the mother of the Messiah, right? A very important role. I believe we all have a calling, a mission in life, a purpose, an assignment from God. He created us uniquely for His glory and HIS purposes. The last

thing I want is for God to give MY assignment to someone else, because I didn't want to do it or was scared that I couldn't do it. He's going to give you the courage and the strength as long as you are willing.

We learn and grow through the assignments that God gives to us. Someone once said, "God doesn't use people to get work done, He uses work to get people done." So, today it is my hope that you walk away thinking about Mary's courage and where you might need to know that God has an assignment for you, too.

Along the way, I will share my own experiences in these three areas; my own confessions.

LISTENING

How well does Mary listen?

In this passage about the annunciation, although this text doesn't say anything about the time of day or if others were present, I am assuming that Gabriel caught Mary at a time when she was alone. So let's presume there is not a big audience around. Now, who does most of the talking? Gabriel does most of the talking, which means Mary is doing more of the listening. In the entire dialogue with Gabriel, she only speaks *twice*:

- 1) *Once* to ask a legitimate, clarifying question ("but, I'm a virgin") and
- 2) *Once* to surrender.

In verse 29, the Bible says that she "wondered" what sort of greeting the angel was offering. The Greek word for "wonder" or "ponder" is "διαλογίζομαι." It means "to reason, to consider." Mary is reasoning; she is deliberating. She is keeping quiet as she is thinking. Even though she is perplexed by his words, she remains silent.

Mary is quite understandably confused at this point. In her culture, the linear route to take would be to get married, live together, have intercourse, become pregnant, and give birth. In that order.

But, the point is, Mary listened well.

How well do I listen?

Now, I wanted to offer a word of warning, as well, about listening. It is important to be in tune with the Holy Spirit so that we know we are hearing *Him* and not listening to someone else. It is important that we not only know what is our calling or our assignment, but what is *not* our calling or assignment. I can share a story that illustrates this.

A number of years ago I was a fairly new Christian. A friend of mine was planning a mission trip to Hawaii and tried to talk me into going with her. She used language like "you really need to do this. It will be good for you." But, I knew her well enough to know that I had to be very discerning because she liked talking people into things. So I said that I would pray about it. I went to bed one night, slept well, and awoke the next morning knowing clearly I was *not* supposed to go to Hawaii with her. I went to bed a bit foggy in what I was to do, but awoke with complete clarity. That is how God speaks to me often, in dreams or while I am asleep.

I asked Jesus, once, "What is my mission?" He responded, "Your mission is to help unloved people feel loved. When I asked, "Who are the unloved people?" He said, "Unloved people are the ones who don't know Me."

For me, one of my burning passions is to also help people understand the greatness of God, to help them realize that He has so much to offer us that we either decline or don't see. He has only the best for us and yet we often settle for so little. I want to help people make wiser choices in life, based on the knowledge that Jesus has the best for us. He just planted that desire in me, so I feel called to do that.

So that's my story about listening to God and the assignment that He has for me. Now let's talk about you.

How well do you listen?

Listening is an art. Are you attentive when someone is needing to verbally process or just needs some comfort? God uses other people to speak to us, just as He used Gabriel to speak to Mary.

A concept I have learned recently is something called "active listening." It means that we remain silent when someone is speaking to us (just like Mary did) and we do not think of how we will respond or a similar story that we want to share. We are not thinking about what we will make for dinner or the traffic on the way home. We are simply present with them, actively listening.

I read an article years ago, that said that if doctors let their patients finish telling them their symptoms, the diagnosis would be very different. It would be much more accurate!

But, we especially need to listen to the Holy Spirit. I have a book that outlines Centering Prayer, which teaches how to be quiet before God and wait in open attentiveness. That is something that I wish to improve.

Now, let's talk about trusting.

TRUSTING

How well did Mary trust?

Mary likely had a strong faith in God, due to her quick decision. At the end of her visit from Gabriel, she says so beautifully, "I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled." Now, she knew the name and the gender, that He would have His own throne, that He would reign over Jacob's descendants forever, and that His kingdom would never end, the Holy Spirit would visit her, meaning that the baby would be God's Son.

Gabriel gave her a lot of big facts, but what is he leaving out? He's leaving out the details. God doesn't tell Mary what her life will be like, He doesn't tell her that her son will be adored by some, and threatened by others, and finally, He doesn't tell her that her son will be a homicide victim.

But, Mary trusts God because she knows Him. You cannot trust someone's word that you don't know.

How well do I trust?

Now, trusting isn't too difficult for me. I remember as a child, always trusting that things would turn out all right and every cloud had a silver lining. Also, God blessed me with discernment, so that guides me in knowing who and what I can trust.

I have such a deep love for God and know He only wants what is best for us. In the Old Testament, I read so many stories of God longing to have His people trust Him and the blessings that He provided when they did.

How well do you trust?

Have you seen God's hand in your life? Do you believe that He is fighting for you; that He has your back? Do you have faith that He is plotting and scheming to bless you? Have you had ups and downs, but trust that God works for the good of those who love him, as we know from Romans 8:28?

Has anything happened to cause a rift in that trust? If that is the case, I encourage you to put your hand back in His and continue on your journey.

Finally, let's look at surrendering.

SURRENDERING

How well does Mary surrender?

It seems clear that Mary has no "trust issues." From what we read, her interaction with Gabriel is fairly brief and then she announces that she is "the servant of the Lord." She is fully onboard with her call, her assignment.

At this point, after all of her thinking, wondering, and doubting Mary surrenders. When did she doubt? When she said, "How can this be, since I'm a virgin?" Doubting is okay, but hopefully surrender will follow as it did with Mary.

But Mary likely realized that if she believes in the God who created the world, delivered her people from Egypt, and protected them for centuries, why wouldn't He be able to do this?

As Tim Keller says in *Encounters with Jesus*, when it comes to following Him, the hardest thing to give is *in*. Mary gave in; she surrendered.

How well do I surrender?

Now, I admit that surrendering is challenging for me. Often in my life, I have felt like I have been on my own and it is difficult to turn over the reins, even to God.

I really struggled with this sermon this past week. Have you ever had that mental block where you are really frustrated and you know you have a deadline? But, I believe that God opens our minds when we are in alignment with Him, because He doesn't care about deadlines and timeframes. He cares about the condition of our heart and if we are leaning on Him.

So, Wednesday night, in sharing this with a friend and she said to me, "Rosalie, you just have to surrender it to Jesus."

As I was praying afterwards and doing just that, I had a revelation and I said to Jesus, "Your MOM...as a teenager...was better at this...than I am in middle age!"

How well do you surrender?

Do you surrender some things, but not all things? Are you a generous, faithful tither, but still have some bad habits or addictions? Are you available for God's call on your life? Do you have a sense that He has spoken to you about your assignment, but have not yet acted on it?

Now, even though in Mary's case, the Bible seems to indicate that there is a particular order:

- 1) Listen
- 2) Trust
- 3) Surrender

I don't necessarily think that everything will occur perfectly in that order. God wired us each differently and we have different backgrounds, different stages of faith, and different stages in life. There is no perfect recipe for each of us to discover our call. Sometimes, we may trust well, so surrender is easy. Or perhaps surrendering is not difficult for us, but we aren't sure if we are listening well or hearing Him correctly.

From my experience with Jesus, he is a gentleman. However we are wired, He will meet us there, but, He's not going to force Himself on us. He wants us to listen to Him, trust Him, and surrender to Him.

Now, you may be asking yourself, "How do I know what my assignment is? How do I know what God wants me to do?" What is *my* mission, *my* role? But, I also don't think we have to sit and wait for God to give us an assignment, wait for Him to show up. We can examine ourselves; examine the way He made us.

I think we can start with how God wired us. One of the expressions I like to use is "Where is my sweet spot?" As you may know, the term, "sweet spot" is used in sports and it means that it is the spot on a racket, a club, or a bat where the ball is most effectively hit. It also means, "An optimum point or combination of factors or qualities." I think our "sweet spot" is where we see a need in the world or in our city or on our street and we have the gift and the ability to meet that need. But, we don't know until we try. Are you an extrovert who may be wired to teach large groups of people? Are you an introvert who prefers one on ones with people? Ask other people what they see in you, what natural talents they observe, what personality traits they notice. Ask if they notice times when you just seem to come alive and where you are joyful in serving. Get feedback!

Now, I do want to share a special story with you as an example of someone who accepted an assignment from God. As you know, He often will give us an assignment that is related to an area where we have experienced pain or heartache. I was privileged to have a recent conversation with Bruce Ramirez about his years of service in the Divorce Recovery ministry at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. He briefly shared with me how he first came to attend Divorce Recovery after his separation. During the course of his recovery and involvement in the ministry, he came to realize how life-giving it was to him during that time in his life. Over the 10 years that he served in Divorce Recovery on a weekly basis, he became very involved in leadership and has touched the lives of dozens and dozens of people who also experienced the breakup of their marriage. My point is that Bruce was not only a blessing to these people, but he was blessed beyond measure, himself. He was right where God wanted Him to be and

he knew it. Bruce was truly in his "sweet spot"! He really thrived in the assignment that God had given to him and he continues to serve in that capacity here at West Valley.

One final note that I want to offer about calling, is this: It is important to realize that if God has a call on someone's life, if God has wired them a certain way or given them a particular talent, we probably shouldn't stand in His way. In other words, if He wired someone in a particular way to serve Him and His kingdom for His purposes, we are in opposition to those purposes if we try to thwart His efforts. We really can't fight the way God made people. Mary did not try to thwart God's efforts and make Jesus something that He wasn't. I'm sure she wanted to protect Him like any mother would, but she let God have His way.

So, remember,

Listen: Practice Centering Prayer if you need to and sit quietly before God. Ask Him about your calling.

Trust: Read all the Scriptures that show God's faithfulness. Ask others to share their faith stories with you.

Surrender: Ask God to help heal anything that may be hindering your surrendering to Him.

Listen, trust, surrender. But, not necessarily in that order.