

And Heaven and Nature Sing: Obedience

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

December 20, 2020

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

If we looked up the word “obedience” in the Oxford English Dictionary, I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw this definition: “Then Mary said, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”

Some translations use the word “handmaid” here: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.” That word has fallen out of favor these days, especially if you have watched the Hulu tv series, “The Handmaid’s Tale.” It’s the Greek word *doulos*, which meant to be tied to someone, to be bound to someone. So, in the Greek language it is not negative at all. In fact, when used of God, it means one who worships God and submits to God. In other words, one who is obedient. Mary is the definition of obedience in this story.

Do you realize Mary could have been as young as thirteen in our text from Luke? In their culture, girls typically married between the ages of thirteen and their early twenties. Imagine how frightening this must have been for young Mary. We are so familiar with this story and have so sentimentalized it that we could fail to see the stark horror this must have caused her. Luke says that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary calling her “favored one” and saying that the Lord was with her. That alone is enough to terrify someone. Luke then points out the obvious—that she was “much perplexed,” as my translation anemically puts it. Some translations say, “greatly troubled.” *The Message* says, “She was thoroughly shaken.” I suspect even that is an understatement.

Observing young Mary’s reaction, Gabriel assured her that she did not need to be afraid. He reaffirmed that she had indeed found “favor” with God. And then here’s the bombshell: she would conceive and bear a son whom she would name Jesus. Thirteen years old? Sixteen? Nineteen? The angel went on to say that her son would be great and would be called Son of the Most High. And listen to this. The angel said that her son would assume the throne of Israel’s greatest king, King David. Her son would be the king of Israel! Imagine!

“How can this be,” Mary seems to blurt out, “since I am a virgin?”

Good question! Honest question. So, Gabriel explained to young Mary that it would be a miracle. The Holy Spirit would cause this to happen; therefore the child would be holy. He would even be called the Son of God. He told Mary that she shouldn’t doubt his word because a miracle was occurring with her relative Elizabeth too. Elizabeth was beyond the age of childbearing, yet she too would bear a son. As you know, his name was John.

Next the angel Gabriel says something that is very important and not plainly evident in English. It’s a play on words in the Greek text. My translation reads this way: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” That’s what he told Mary about this astounding announcement. Nothing will be impossible with God. That verse could be translated this way: “For *no thing* (or “event” or “word”) will be impossible with God.” It is the Greek word *rema*, and it can be translated either as “thing, event, or word.”

Here’s why I say this is important. Mary responds to the angel this way, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.” Then she says this, which may be the most important words she ever spoke: “let it be with me according to your *word (rema)*.” Mary uses the same word as Gabriel. What we can see in the Greek language that we miss in English is that Mary rises fully to the challenge of God. She repeats Gabriel’s exact language and thereby gives herself to this “thing,” the word or work of God. She doesn’t try to control God and adjust God’s plan to hers. No, Mary opens herself fully to the message of the angel: “Let it be with me according to your *rema*.”

Obedience.

There is an ancient legend. It says that before Gabriel appeared to Mary he had already appeared to many other women but did not hear from them an appropriate response. When he finally appeared to Mary, according to the legend, all the angels of heaven were listening for her response: Let it be with me according to your word.

Mary is the definition of obedience. It surely wasn’t what she would have chosen. Like any young girl, she surely had dreams of how her life would unfold with Joseph. But she was obedient to God, and as a result, the glory of Christmas was born. Gabriel was right. She was favored by God,

but her favor was not elevated social standing, great wealth, or wisdom. She was favored with giving birth to One whose name we still speak with reverence over 2000 years later. She was favored with giving birth to One whose teachings have changed the world, One whose life of love still melts the coldest hearts and brings the meanest and the most desperate to their knees. Yes, she was just a young girl—thirteen, sixteen, nineteen years old. But she became a central figure in God’s plan of salvation because of her obedience.

That’s the way God works. God comes to those who are open to God’s *rema*, the “thing” God is doing. God uses those who are willing to be obedient. And maybe...maybe that’s what’s missing for some of us? Maybe we’ve crowded God out of our life, and we now feel disconnected. Worship doesn’t bring the joy it once did. The work you do doesn’t seem to matter as much. It seems like you’re just existing rather than living? I’m asking. Could it be that the greatest gift we could give our self is to reconnect with God? To say those words of Mary, “Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

You know, some people believe that Mary is still able to influence our world and our lives. Around the world thousands of shrines are dedicated to Mary, and millions of pilgrims visit these sites every year, some on their knees, some with tears in their eyes, some with great needs they lay before Mary. Some claim that Mary visits them and provides miracles. In 1981, six teenagers in Bosnia-Herzegovina reported seeing an apparition of Mary. The teens lived in a small shepherding village called Medjugorje. They claimed that her message to the world was this: “I have come to tell the world that God exists. He is the fullness of life, and to enjoy this fullness and peace, you must return to God.” More than 40 million people from around the world have since visited the shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Medjugorje, many claiming to have received some kind of miracle while there.

I don’t know what to think about this. I’m Baptist, and we tend to look at claims like this with a critical eye, right? But these shrines exist around the world, and millions of people visit them every year, many reporting deeply meaningful spiritual experiences while there. As a Baptist, I think I can say this much. Mary and her story still help people reconnect with God. In some way, she is still helping people say what she said long ago to Gabriel, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.

The British hymnist and poet Brian Wren has written a prayer based on this text. I like the title, “The Space to Say ‘Yes.’”

*Living God, Sovereign Love,
giving to Mary
anxious perplexity,
faith to believe,
and the space to say “Yes,”
keep us alert for visiting angels,
that we may hear your call,
be honest yet faithful,
and know that for you, nothing is impossible,
in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

(Advent Liturgies and Worship Elements (Year B), p. 66)

Obedience. Space to say yes to God. A young girl has become our instructor today. She is the definition of obedience. May her example keep us alert for visiting angels, that we too may hear God’s call, be honest and faithful, and know that nothing is impossible in Jesus Christ.

Soon heaven and nature will sing the glorious good news of Christmas. Let us join with our own song of obedience.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the example of young Mary. Like her, may we too practice obedience. And in doing so, may we find the joy of Christmas. Amen.