

December 6, 2020

“Altar-ed Christmas: Mary”

[Luke 1:26-38](#)

We’ve been talking all fall about life-altering moments that take place at the holy altars of life; and by altars we mean those special places we encounter the living God – or, more properly understood, the places where God encounters us; comes to us; meets with us. Remember, Christmas was God’s plan – which He initiated – so that He could be fully face-to-face with us.

Let me ask the same questions I started out with in September. What were some of your life-altering moments? How has your life been altar-ed by God? What difference has an encounter with Jesus made in your life? What about OUR life together?

Last week, Jason helped us look at Zechariah’s life-altering moment in the temple. This week, instead of an old married man, we witness a holy moment in the life of an unwed, teenage girl. Same God. Same angel Gabriel. Similar promise; “kid on the way.” But different response.

[\[Read Luke 1:26-38\]](#)

We often think of and talk about the ways God changes our lives for the good. We say “God is . . .” making us more patient or joyful; molding us into a faithful friend or spouse; freeing us from addiction and granting sobriety; reconciling a vital relationship; helping us push past our fears to take a risk that pays off; directing us to meaningful and fulfilling ministry. I say, “Bring it on!” when it comes to these kind of alterations.

But what happens when you have a life-altering moment and it alters your life in a ‘not-so-good’ (as in more uncomfortable, more difficult – even more painful) way? It happens more often than we’d like. Think of the lives those we’ve already looked at this past fall:

-Abraham, Jacob, Hannah, Isaiah, Elijah. God did not call them into easier lives!

Think of the whole topic of giving and following God’s plan of generosity. Stepping into God’s financial plan always stings at first.

We’d love for God to make us more patient, or more successful, or more . . . whatever. We welcome His desire to make us more like Jesus; to make us more like the Acts 2 Church He died to establish; to make us more joyful and generous; to set us free from the prisons of our bodies and minds. But you and I really don’t want our lives to get worse in the process, do we?

Mary’s life was about to get a lot worse . . .

Talk about a moment at a holy altar! She also has an encounter with Gabriel – who, as he told Zechariah, “stands in the presence of God.” But what he came to declare to Mary wasn’t going to make her life better or easier. It certainly wasn’t going to lead to popularity; not with her parents or her fiancée . . . or just about anyone in the Galilean village of Nazareth who would watch her pregnancy progress.

Sometimes, God's life-altering work makes things worse before things get better. Think about it: Mary's life would be difficult and painful for the next 30-some years – starting with what her family and Joseph would think about her when they found out she was pregnant and Joseph wasn't the father; and ending with watching her son hang on a cross and gasp for His last breath. The real joy and goodness didn't and wouldn't come until Mary and some of her friends found an Empty Tomb and physical proof that Jesus was alive.

Sometimes, things don't get better for a very long time; but all the while, God is shaping us and remaking us and fulfilling His promise to make all things new – in us and through us. But we have to wait . . . and wait through some difficult, disorienting moments. Let's not glamorize Mary or elevate her too quickly. Though this life-altering moment was certainly a wonderful start, it would take a LONG . . . time for God to transform her more fully, and give her the deep sense of peace and understanding she longed for.

I couldn't wait for my first sabbatical here at FPC in 2014. I couldn't wait to get a group together to write a grant proposal for a sum of money that would make it a dream come true. That was in January of 2013. Things were going pretty well . . . we were in our first year of our first capital campaign but didn't yet know if we should pull the trigger to work toward actually building. Looking back, I thought I knew what I was doing. But, in reality, I knew very little about personal discernment or how to lead others through any semblance of discerning God's will in weighty matters. In the midst of all this:

-I CANCELLED our Leadership Retreat with staff and leaders. Honestly, I was out of fresh ideas.

-Which freed up a bunch of men and some of our sons to hear JOHN ELDREDGE at CVVC on a Saturday morning.

(Luckily, John Eldredge made a bunch of his ministries talks available through a free download. Of course, I didn't even know how to download something back then. Luckily, our son, Andrew, did it for me and put it on an iPod.)

-About that time, I realized that writing for the grant with a Sabbatical Team would take an additional year and push the sabbatical off until the Summer of 2015.

-Somewhere in there I became aware I was not leading some on our staff well, which led to tension, which I was just avoiding.

-In the meantime, I kept listening and re-listening to those 10-12 John Eldredge talks about the struggles of a man's life for most of two years while I worked out in the CMU rec center, and discovered how much unfinished business there was from the loss of my father when I was 15

-I began to see how the scars/wounds affected my relationships.

-Being awarded the large, sabbatical grant brought enough euphoria and distraction in July of 2014. Starting on “The Story” that September was also very cool. Those two positives provided just enough of a buzz to keep me excited, while what I still wasn’t leading well as Senior Pastor was getting worse.

-By late fall/early winter of 2014-15, I had hit a wall . . . and didn’t even know it.

By the time I started my sabbatical a few months later, I realized that the initial plan – crafted with my Sabbatical Grant Writing Team and primarily focusing on leadership and various mentors/mentees throughout my life and ministry – [the plan] had been altered . . . dramatically. It looked like I’d mostly be examining a lot of loss and brokenness in my own life. But I really didn’t know how that would happen or what that would look like.

By the time I ended what was a both glorious and painful 100 days of rest and renewal (and took some amazing trips with family and friends), it was pretty clear that the post-sabbatical coaching and counseling stipend of \$2,500 that came with the grant would mostly be going to therapy. It was time to start professionally unpacking all these discoveries/revelations from God (maybe it wasn’t Gabriel but He was getting through to me nonetheless). And, as many of you know who have been in counseling, things got worse (or more painful) before they got better. I wanted God to change me, bless me, alter me for good. But did it have to take so long and be so hard? And, by the way, the total altar-ation of my life is a long way from over . . . and I’m guessing that’s true for your life as well.

Are we – like Mary had to be – willing to hang in there with God, with ourselves, and with each other for the slow, steady and, often, painful life-altering work of God? I’m convinced many of us are NOT. We all, deep down, just want the “Easy Button.” We don’t like to wait, do we? For God, ourselves . . . or for others.

It doesn’t matter if we are waiting for vaccines, financial rebounds, the end of our personal struggles, our kids to straighten up, our bodies to straighten out(?), mask-wearing to end, justice to break forth in the world, things getting back to normal, or our hearts to get healed. We don’t like waiting at all. And we really don’t like it when things get worse while we wait.

But Mary hangs in there; and not only with this first life-altering announcement – as hard as that was going to be to work through. There were so many other moments along the way – filled with confusion and complexity, disappointment and doubt; up and down moments as she followed her son. It was over a LONG time and a lot of ‘not-so-good, that Mary became a changed woman; altar-ed through and through.

And it started with God speaking to her and her asking an honest question; her getting an answer and giving a humble response. I want to highlight that Mary asks a question of Gabriel, just like Zechariah did. A question . . .

Our relationship with God is meant to be a dialogue. If it's going to be a true relationship this is essential. We get to ask questions. And yet the questions God welcomes aren't the ones demanding Him to prove Himself to us or questions that put Him in service to us. Questions are meant to deepen our intimacy with Him and clarify our understanding of His will – SO THAT we can better submit and obey . . . and welcome His life-altering plan. Luke makes it clear that Mary's motive for asking a question is different than Zechariah's. N.T. Wright helps us with this observation: **“We shouldn't miss the contrast between the muddled, puzzled Zechariah in the previous story and the obedient humility of Mary in this one. She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, not proof.”** (N.T. Wright in *Luke for Everyone*)

Zechariah goes mute and can't say a thing for over 9 months. But Mary can still speak after her question is answered and uses her voice to say what God longs to hear from all of us: “Here I am!”

[Think of who else said, “Here am I!” Abraham, Isaiah, Hannah/Samuel, Elijah's “There you are!” on Mount Sinai]

Saying “Here am I” is where real transformation kicks in. Mary says, ‘I'm available.’ ‘I'm willing.’ ‘I'm listening, **Waiting and Ready** for whatever is next.’ Waiting and Ready. That's the posture of Advent. The practice of Advent is very different from our culture's idea of Christmas; full of hustle, bustle, acquisition and distraction. Luckily, we're not stuck or doomed to fall into line with the way everyone else does Christmas. We can be “WILLINGLY” different; But we have to join Mary in declaring, **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word.”** (Luke 1:38) This, of course, will not be easy to utter. But it IS possible.

Do you remember what the angel Gabriel said just after he mentioned Elizabeth and Zechariah were also having a little baby, and just before Mary's willing response?

“Nothing will be impossible with God!” (Luke 1:37)

Don't ever think that what needs to be altar-ed in our lives can't be or won't be. We might not like how God gets us there; how long it takes or how painful it may get along the way. But He WILL accomplish what He promised: to make us fully alive, fully ourselves, and fully His . . . just like His one and only Son.

God's not done with Mary. She's willing to be God's vessel, but she still needs help beyond herself. Next week we'll follow her to see what kind of help God has in mind.

In the meantime, we WAIT . . . at the Table – where we are also reminded that things had to get A LOT worse for Jesus . . . before they could get better for us.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. What are two or three things (big or small) that you are waiting for?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when things got worse before they got better?
3. If you were in Mary's shoes, what other questions would you have had for the angel Gabriel?
4. How patient are you when it comes to waiting for God to bring change to your life? How patient are you with yourself and the slow and painful process of transformation? How patient are you with others?
5. In what way would you be willing for your life to "get worse" so that someone else's life could "get better"?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?