

What do you want for Christmas, Mary?
My Reputation!
Luke 1:26-38

As we saw in our kids' program, by the end of this story, angels were singing, shepherds were celebrating and wise men were bowing. But the first Christmas ended better than it started. For instance, a few weeks ago, we asked this question of Joseph, "What do you want for Christmas?" Do you remember his answer? "A divorce. I want a quiet divorce from Mary. She is not the woman I thought she was. She has betrayed me, given herself to another man. And I am humiliated. I want her out of my life, I want to pick up the pieces, and move on."

But Joseph wasn't the only one humiliated, was he? Luke tells us the other side of the story. Let's read it.

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. ³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a

town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

I wonder how many hundreds of times I have read this Christmas story. But I had never noticed verse 39: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth." A look at the map will show you that the trip from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea was about a 100 mile journey. So, simple question: Why did Mary hurry out of Nazareth to make such a journey? Because suddenly, she was pregnant. Nazareth was a tiny little village. Everyone would see that baby bump. Everyone would know that she and Joseph weren't married yet. Everyone would assume they had jumped the gun. And her reputation would be destroyed.

And since Joseph knew they hadn't jumped the gun, her relationship with him was destroyed, too, right? So by the time Mary says to Gabriel, "Okay, I am a servant of the Lord; I will do as you have said." By the time she got those brave words out of her mouth, Mary knew her good reputation was history. At the very least, she would be the laughingstock of her town. And her fiancée would think her an adulteress.

If I were in Mary's sandals, I might have been tempted to say one more thing to Gabriel: "I appreciate you telling me this in person. Now I wonder, would you mind appearing to every other person in Nazareth while you're at it? Because you have just ruined my reputation and my life." Why did Mary "hurry" to Elizabeth's house 100 miles away? Perhaps because no one would know her and she wouldn't have to endure the "cluck, clucks" and the "tsk tsks" of her hometown crowd... much less the stones that might be thrown at her by the village elders. The people of Nazareth could be a very tough crowd.

Of course, Gig Harbor is different. We don't care so much what people say about us in this community, right? In little old Gig Harbor, we don't worry about keeping up appearances; about how others perceive us, right? Reputation isn't as important to us as it was to Mary, right? Right. We've been talking all year about what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus. Not a pretender. Not the religious hypocrite that Jesus so often condemned, who acts one way on Sunday morning and another the rest of the week. No, we are asking what does it mean to be a genuine, 24/7 apprentice of Jesus Christ? And as we learn from Mary, sometimes it means putting your reputation on the line.

I spoke to a man this week who has been trying to be more intentional about his witness for Jesus in the work place. So, at a recent company dinner, he decided to take a risk. He was sitting at one end of a long table and they were talking about some hard things in life. Finally, he spoke up. "Well, Jesus said..." and he tells me that the moment he said the name, "Jesus," the entire other end of the table went silent. Like the old E.F. Hutton commercial, do you remember. Dead silence... people leaning in.. .wondering who would dare quote Jesus at a dinner party. He

went on to tell me, “I want to be a good example for Jesus, but I’m also afraid. I don’t want to be known as that religious loon.”

Do you understand that concern? We don’t want a reputation as a religious loony bird. We want to be well received by those around us. We want respect. But every time you add religion into the mix—especially Christianity, especially the name of Jesus—you take the risk of marring your reputation. And if you are not yet a follower of Jesus, but begin to take him seriously, your family might think you are crazy. I have another friend, a physician, who decided to study the Bible for himself, came to believe the claims about Jesus were true, decided to follow him, and his entire family thought he had lost his mind.

In that moment of opportunity, when Gabriel told Mary how God wanted to use her, with a thousand questions swirling in her brain...her brave response was, “Okay, I’ll do it, even though it probably means that people will never look at me the same way again.” If you were to say yes to the invitation of Jesus—to ask a friend to come to Christmas Eve, or to invite a troubled couple to our marriage seminar, or to offer to pray for a friend about their cancer diagnosis, or to join our church in January as we read through all four gospels together—yes, it might put your reputation at risk. But as it did with Mary, you might develop a new reputation as a compassionate and courageous follower of Jesus who really seeks to live on Monday what they claim to believe on Sunday.

Reputation is an important thing. But if you are living in obedience to God—if you are living life as Jesus tells us to live—you won’t need to worry about your reputation. God will protect your reputation and he will use you in a powerful way. So ask yourself this question this morning: are you so worried about appearances that you’ve managed to hide entirely what the Holy Spirit is trying to do in your life? Is it time to come clean? Mary’s response is a good one. “I am a servant of the Lord. I will do what you have said!”

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don’t teach! Listen and reflect on God’s word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER

1. In Luke 1, Gabriel appears to two people, Zechariah and Mary, with very similar news. And they respond similarly...it seems. Yet Zechariah is struck mute for his response and Mary is blessed. Can you compare the two? How are they different? Which one best describes **your** response every time you realize that God might want to use you to make disciples for him?
2. Can you think of a time when you risked your reputation with others for the sake of Jesus? Or, a time when **because** of your reputation, you denied Jesus or avoided speaking well of him? Will you share it?
3. What is the promise of the angel to Mary about how God will sustain her through this challenging opportunity? Could you pray that the Holy Spirit will give you the courage to take the risk to witness for Christ in some way, e.g. inviting them to Christmas Eve service with you? Will you hold each other accountable for this?