

Mary, Servant of the Promises

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

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Scripture Readings

2 Samuel 7:1-13

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Sermon

We said the Apostles' Creed together last Sunday morning. It's one of the oldest organized statements of Christian faith. But it's glaringly incomplete. So is the Nicene Creed. And the Athanasian Creed.

Each of those creeds makes important theological claims. That God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God. That Jesus will come again to bring complete justice.

But the creeds are glaringly incomplete. They claim that God is the creator of everything. They claim that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. They claim that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life. All well and good and true, but incomplete.

The creeds give us the beginning of the story and the end of the story. But they leave out the middle of the story. The creeds give us the climax of the story. But they have nothing to say about how the story gets there, about how the story moves from the God the Father, Creator of everything, to Jesus the Son, Savior of everything.

How is it that Jesus came to be born of the virgin Mary? That's the question. And the creeds don't really answer it.

THE CREEDS ARE QUITE LIMITED. They reflect the first two chapters of the Bible, and they reflect the content of the New Testament. That's all. It's as if the rest of the story never occurred.

Read just the creeds, and you have no idea about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Read just the creeds, and you have no idea about Moses and Egypt and the exodus. Read just the creeds, and you have no idea about David and Jerusalem and the temple. Read just the creeds, and you have no idea about the exile and about waiting.

The creeds give us the answer without giving us the question. It's a good thing we have more than the creeds. It's a good thing we have the entire Old Testament. And it's a good thing we have the gospels.

LUKE CHAPTER ONE TELLS THE STORY of the annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary. Gabriel has news for Mary. It's personal news. Something is about to

happen to her. Something completely unexpected, something completely unforeseen, is about to happen to her. Without the involvement of a man, Mary is going to conceive and give birth to a son. Her personal world is about to be turned upside down.

But there's more to the angel's news than that. Much more. It's not just personal news. And it's not something that comes from nowhere and crashes into Mary's life. No. It's news with a story behind it, a long story. And it's news that matters to more than just Mary. As Mary would come to understand, it was news, good news, for her people Israel and for all the descendants of Abraham.

THE NEWS FROM GABRIEL IS that Mary will give birth to a son. But there's more to it than that, because Mary's son will be no ordinary son.

His name is the first clue. He will be called Jesus. That's the Greek version; Mary would have heard the angel say *Joshua*. Joshua. The name evokes important history. Through Joshua the LORD brought Israel's long period of wandering and waiting to an end. Through Joshua the LORD led them, at last, into the land promised to Abraham. So even the name of Mary's son hints that the times are about to change, that something the people have been waiting for is about to happen.

And there's more. Mary's son will be great. Whatever his given name, he will be recognized as Son of the Most High. There's no higher designation. (Never mind the claims of Caesar!) Mary's son will be a man to reckon with. Mary's son will be a man to make a difference.

HOW WILL THAT BE? *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And his kingdom will have no end.*

Those words from the angel are not chosen merely because they sound good. And they're not chosen merely because they accurately represent what's about to happen. No, those words are chosen because they recall promises that God made to David, promises that have never been forgotten, promises that have been awaiting their fulfillment, waiting a thousand years.

HERE'S HOW THE STORY WENT. David wanted to build a temple, a house for God. Not a bad idea. It made perfect sense to the prophet Nathan. All your better-grade gods came with a temple.

The God of Israel, however, was quite content to dwell in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a portable structure. It didn't have a fixed location. How appropriate for a God who won't be pinned down. How appropriate for the God who said, *I will be who I will be.*

Remember how Israel wanted a king, so they could be like all the other nations? Well, now their king wanted to build a temple for Israel's god, like all the other nations did for their gods.

God was not interested, certainly not in having David build a temple. *But your son, God said, your son will do it. Your son will build a temple, a place for my presence.*

And that wasn't all. God is the one who gives, who gives beyond measure. So God promised a gift to David. *Your son, David, the one who will set up a place for my presence, your son . . . I will set him up. I will set him up forever. His kingdom will always endure. And he himself will always be the king.*

DAVID'S SON SOLOMON built a temple, a place for God's presence. But Solomon did not last as king. Like every other king, he died and his days came to an end. And Solomon's kingdom did not last forever. Within a generation, his kingdom was torn in two. And as the years went by, those two pieces were further dismantled. Then the presence of God took flight from the temple. And the temple itself was destroyed, with not one stone left upon another. All that was left were the promises and the fading hope that they would ever be fulfilled.

When the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary, it's with that long story in mind. It's with the old promises in mind. It's with the hope and the waiting in mind. Mary's song captures the significance: *He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever.* This is the story that Mary hears. Mary surrenders herself to this story, to be the servant of this story. It's a story of promises, promises made by God and never forgotten, promises remembered to this day.

THE CREEDS, HOWEVER, SAY NOTHING about this story. That's a glaring omission. Because we have no idea who Jesus is without this story. We have no idea who Jesus is, if we don't connect him to David and to Israel and to Abraham. We have no idea who Jesus is, unless we hear the old promises.

The LORD told David, *You will have a son who will establish a place for my presence.* Was that about Solomon and the temple in Jerusalem? Sure, for a little while. But so much more it was about David's greater son. It was about Jesus, who is greater than Solomon and greater than the temple. It was about Jesus, who is our Immanuel, God with us, forever. It was about Jesus, who himself is the living, dying, and rising temple of God, where God is present forever.

Jesus may not be here with us in the flesh today. And we may be waiting, waiting like old Israel, waiting for him to return. But he has set a table before us. And he gives us his body and blood in the sacrament of bread and wine.

And so, when we eat and drink, we are together in the presence of the Lord. And when we remember and believe, we become, like Mary, servants, servants of the promises, promises that are expressed in the whole story, promises that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is our Immanuel, God with us.