

Sermon Notes, December 3, 2017
The First Christian, Luke 1:26-55

Today when we listen to Mary, consider how she received the message from the angel, and how she responded to it; what you have here is the first Christian. Her response is nothing less than a conversion.

Let's look and see how Mary was converted. Because she's the first Christian, she can teach us an awful lot about our own Christian experience. She can help us evaluate whether we are Christians. She can help us evaluate the reality and the vitality of our own Christian experience. The message of Christmas is the gospel message.

How does Mary respond? In four ways, and these four ways (these aspects of her experience) are actually four tests you can use to see the reality or the vitality of your own Christian experience. These four things that mark her Christian experience are *centrality*, *wonder*, *fear*, and *truth*.

1. Centrality

She says, "My soul glorifies and my spirit exalts ..." She is saying, "Nothing has ever gripped me like this. Nothing has ever moved or shaken me like this. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. All of me, it's encompassing all of me: my soul and my spirit." She's been moved to the very depths. There is a centrality about her Christian experience. She's been moved at her center.

Now, this happens, but it happens to her in stages. Here is something important to consider. You cannot standardize Christian experience. Sometimes conversion is a slow process. Sometimes it's immediate. Mary is in the middle. Mary, from what I can tell, had three stages in her conversion.

a) The first stage was *incredulity*.

The first time she heard the gospel message she said, "How can these things be?" Do you know what she's saying now? She's saying, "This is impossible." She says, "Look at me! I'm a virgin! God's coming into my life and I'll be pregnant with God's Son! Impossible!"

b) The second stage was *confused submission*.

Do you know what she says? In the old KJV she says, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy [will]."

You see, at first, the gospel is impossible, but then as you think about it, you begin to realize this is something you need & all the alternatives are less credible than this. You get into a kind of middle stage. You no longer think this is ridiculous. You no longer dismiss it. You say, "God, I know I need this. I realize this makes more sense than anything else I've ever heard. I still don't really know what I'm supposed to do, but I'm going to listen to you. I'm going to trust you. I'm going to follow you."

c) Finally, the third stage is *total comprehension*.

It's where Elizabeth says, "Why am I so favored as to have a visit from the mother of my Lord? Blessed is she who believes everything she's been told," and suddenly it all comes together for Mary. "And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

It can happen a lot of different ways, but my question to you is has it happened to you? Have you been moved in your depths?

There are all sorts of ways of dealing with it, but now it's inside you. There has been an outside power that has come into your center, and it's dealing with you, and you know it. What is it? It's the One who made you at the beginning, making you again, ("Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth") and you can't get rid of it.

2. Wonder

When you read and listen to her song, notice she says, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... the Mighty One has done great things for me ...” *For me?* She’s looking at all of the history of salvation and all the history of the world and realizes it’s all coming down on her! There is a note of joy and astonishment in her!

What is Christianity? What is the essence of Christianity? If you say Christianity is going to church, Christianity is believing a certain creed, Christianity is living a certain kind of life—a list of dos and don’ts, then there is no surprise in your life because you’re centering Christianity in what you are doing.

On the other hand, if you center Christianity in what’s been done to you, there will be a note of surprise and wonder. John Newton wrote: “Let us love and sing and wonder...”

There are two understandings of Christianity: one is it’s us finding God; the other conception is God finding us. If it’s you finding God, there is no surprise or wonder in your life. If it’s God finding you, there is a lot of joy. It’s a sense of revelation. Christianity is a religion of revelation. It’s a religion of grace.

I hope and pray you’re able to think of yourself that way now, that there’s still a sense of joy and wonder about your life, that you’re able to look at yourself and say, “For me? Me a Christian, of all people? Wow!” If you don’t then you don’t fully understand the gospel.

3. Fear

Mary said, “His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.” Those who have his mercy are the ones who fear him. Psalm 130: “I fear you because you have forgiven all my sins.” One of the biggest differences between a Christian and a religious person is the difference in how the fear of God works. There is a fear of law, and there is a fear of love.

The fear of law works like this: “I’m scared of being hurt. My motivation is I work hard to obey and live the best life I can. I go to church. I’m religious because, if I don’t, (and they might not put it this way), but I have to appease God or something might happen to me that won’t be good.”

There is a fear that arises out of love. If you love somebody, and you know they love you, there is a fear of what? Not of being hurt but of hurting. There is a fear of hurting, a fear of wounding. Christianity is different from all the other religions, in that it is a personal relationship, and it the only one in which a person has been gripped by this good and healthy fear that arises out of love: a fear of wounding love. “Look how he loves me. All of the punishment fell on him. He did this for me? Me a Christian, of all people? How can I not do what he asks? Hasn’t he been wounded enough?”

Here is the mark of a real Christian: When you find out because of what happened to Jesus Christ, you no longer can be condemned and there is no punishment coming to you anymore, and that you now live in the grace of God, you are released for energetic, zealous, risky, sacrificial, full-hearted, godly living.

4. Truth

Where did all these great things come from? Do you know where it comes from? She grasped the truth. In verse 49 she says he is the Mighty One, the Holy One, but in verse 50 she says he is the Merciful One. Mary says, “My soul and my spirit ... rejoices in God *my Savior!*” She knows.

Centrality, wonder, fear, and a love of the truth ...

Are they happening to you? Come to him, and they’ll come together.