

She was young. She was a Jew – one of the Chosen People. She was living in a small village named Nazareth. She was engaged to a man named Joseph.

She was getting ready to begin a new stage of her life. No longer would she be a young girl playing with her dolls and learning how to care for a household. Soon she would be married, and have her own baby, and would provide for her child and husband a comfortable home. She had her whole life ahead of her.

But then her life plan changed. Mary's life plan changed.

Recently several beautiful songs have been written about how Mary's life was altered by God. At tonight's worship service the Pont Choir will sing one of those songs: "Breath of Heaven." These are some of the words you will hear tonight:

*I have traveled – Many moonless nights – Cold and weary – With a babe inside
And I wonder what I've done – Holy Father You have come
And chosen me now – To carry Your Son*

*I am waiting – In a silent prayer – I am frightened – By the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone – Must I walk this path alone – Be with me now*

Listen closely tonight and you will hear Mary considering this change in her life plan.

It is more than a change of direction. It is a change that leads somewhere. Mary begins a very special journey of faith. Visualizing the geographical journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem helps us to understand the struggle of the spiritual journey.

The geographical journey Mary traveled was 70 straight miles – if one had earthmoving moving equipment and dynamite to prepare the way. The road they actually traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem was twisting and turning.

You have been on those roads. I have. I grew up in SE MN. When we went visiting we could see from our farmhouse to the next farmhouse where we were going. But in between was a valley. So we twisted and turned our way to get there, going down and going up. Sometimes we were headed in almost the opposite direction.

So it was for Mary as she journeyed with her husband to Bethlehem on those hillsides and valleys and along the river and over the mountains. It was a very long and challenging 70 miles.

That was the geographical journey. But what was the spiritual journey like for Mary? It is the faith that leads from the OT to the NT. Christmas faith leads from the OT to the NT.

An angel came to Mary. The angel lays out God's plan for her. Which is basically this: "You, Mary, will hold God in your arms. You will take care of God. You will wash him, feed him, cloth him. You will set his boundaries, and teach him to walk and read. You will comfort him when he cries and share in his laughter. Mary, you will take care of God as his earthly mother."

This is so different. In the OT God creates with a word, and smites with his very breath. God descends to a mountain and there is smoke and fire and earthquake. And no one can even look at God. This is the God seen most often in the OT.

But now this same God comes and is nestled in the bosom of a young lady, and comforted by her voice, and nurtured by her hands and heart.

It is an absolutely incredible story; the beginning of a new revelation of God: a New Testament. And the point is this: In NT faith God is so close. So close. Mary is the very first one who is able to go on this spiritual journey.

- "Mary, will you embrace Jesus?"
- "Mary, will you receive Jesus?"
- "Mary, will you watch him grow in body and spirit, and will you treasure all of these things?"
- "Mary, when he dies for you, will you still be there; will you come to the cross?"
- "Mary, will you end your earthly days longing to be with Jesus again, yearning to be in the eternal place, where he will hold you, comfort you, forgive you, and give you a new life?"

The angel Gabriel came to two people: to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist; and to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Zechariah heard the angel talk about some marvelous things. Then Zechariah asked a question of the angel. Zechariah asked: *“How can I be sure this will happen?”*

The angel Gabriel was so upset with this lack of faith – *“how can I be sure that it will happen”* – that Gabriel caused Zechariah to be unable to speak for the next 9 months, until what God promised came to pass.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a Zechariah? Do you find yourself asking God, *“How can this happen?”* Maybe we are a Zechariah. Maybe we don't believe what the Christmas story promises.

Maybe Christmas has become just a flurry of activities to keep our minds off of other things.

What has the journey been like for you this past year? Some of us have lost loved ones in the past year – a husband or a wife or a sister or brother. Some of us have seen our loved ones go through such difficulties – a child or a neighbor.

Some of us are tired of life. The joy has gone out and the flame of life is flickering and we have begun to ask: *“What does it matter?”*

Some of us are on autopilot, just trying to get from one week to the next week. Our life has become like a losing monopoly game board – we keep passing go but we are poorer every time – or sadder – or more tired.

What has the journey been like for you this year? Are you today like a Zechariah, asking *“How can I be sure this will happen?”*

But Mary... After the angel Gabriel delivered his message to her she said, *“I am the Lord's servant.”* Mary said, *“I am the Lord's servant.”*

As we gather for Christmas celebrations, as we gather as Christians who believe that God will do what God has promised.

- This day, because of Christmas, we are not just Norwegians and Swedes and Vietnamese and Hispanics – we are Christians.
 - Because of Christmas, we are not just standing before a mountain of thunder and lightning and wondering what God is like – we are Christians.
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Because of Christmas we can be Christians: because of Christ's birth we can be God's friends.

Maya Angelou wrote a poem about what it means to be a Christian. She said:

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I'm not shouting "I'm clean livin."
I'm whispering "I was lost," Now I'm found and forgiven.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I don't speak of this with pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble and need CHRIST to be my guide.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I'm weak and need HIS strength to carry on.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting I have failed and need God to clean my mess.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I'm not claiming to be perfect,
My flaws are far too visible but, God believes I am worth it.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I still feel the sting of pain,
I have my share of heartaches So I call upon His name.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian" I'm not holier than thou,
I'm just a simple sinner who received God's good grace, somehow.¹*

Will you again take the journey that Mary took? Will you hold Jesus in your heart?
Will you open your homes to his presence? Will you walk with him in the years
ahead? Will you believe that all of the good things God promises will come to pass?
Will you be willing to be the servant of the Lord?

Let us pray...

¹ "Christians" ~a poem by Maya Angelou~