

August 15, 2021
Luke 1:46-55

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Confidence of Faith”

“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

I usually do not put much stock in fortune cookies, but there was one occasion when the saying inside my after-dinner treat had a profound impact on my life. It was at a time when I was making a major transition in my life, leaving behind something that was familiar and secure to take on a challenge where there was no guarantee or certainty of success. During this time of anxiety, I opened my fortune cookie after eating my usual order of chicken and broccoli with wonton soup; inside were words that I remember 25 years later: *“Be of good courage; confidence will lead you on.”* I know that fortune cookies are distributed randomly, but it was as if the people who ran that restaurant knew about my situation and wanted to give me an encouraging boost. I kept that slip of paper for many years, and I still remember how those simple words became such a source of strength during that time of uncertainty (which did turn out far better than I had anticipated at the time).

“Confidence” can be defined as “certitude, assurance, and full trust.” It can refer to confidence in our own abilities or talents, and also in the trustworthiness or reliability of a person or things. Successful experiences can provide us with the confidence in our skills to tackle difficult situations, and good experiences with others can give us the confidence to place our trust in them in future situations. On the other hand, negative experiences can shatter our confidence in others and create uncertainty and anxiety within ourselves. It may truly be said that *“confidence is the most beautiful thing you can possess.”*

As I settled into my new environment with the words of that fortune cookie still in mind, I discovered that the word “confidence” comes from the Latin word *con fide*, meaning “with faith.” The origins of confidence lie in our faith in someone or something; above all, true confidence is rooted in our faith in God, the God we believe is trustworthy, the God whose steadfast love endures forever, the God who bestows upon us the gift of faith that is *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* (Hebrews 11:1). While we may have confidence in ourselves or in others, the true source of confidence that is sure and certain is in our loving God who has been revealed to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who

promised to be with us “*always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20), our blessed Saviour from whom “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever*” (ELW Hymn 781). The confidence that gives us the strength to go forward even in life’s most challenging times is rooted in the gift of faith in the God with whom “*all things are possible ... and leads to songs and praise of God, so that the believer esteems God highly and truly magnifies him.*” (Martin Luther, 1521).

Confidence that is rooted in faith in God is at the heart of Biblical teaching in both the Old and New Testament. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, *tharseo* (“to trust in, rely on, be of good courage”) is used as a summons in time of stress or emergency; God’s readiness to help is the basis for this confidence. God speaks through the prophets in offering assurance in times of deepest distress:

- “My spirit abides with you; do not fear.” – Haggai 2:5.
- “Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.” – Zechariah 8:13.

In the New Testament, Jesus issues the summons to be of good courage, to have confidence that is rooted in God’s steadfast presence. He addressed the woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years who has touched his cloak to “*Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well*” (Matthew 9:22), which results in her immediate healing. Jesus responds to the terror of the disciples as he walks on the waters of the Sea of Galilee to “*take heart, it is I; do not be afraid*” (Matthew 14:27). Jesus teaches his disciples that even though they live in a threatening world, they can have confidence and be of good courage because Jesus has overcome all that seeks to defeat and destroy the people of God: “*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*” (John 16:33). Paul continues this teaching in his second letter to the Corinthians, encouraging them to have faith that even though we are now separated from Christ, we are still of good courage for we have the pledge of the Holy Spirit:

- “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” – 2 Corinthians 5:5-9.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews finds a ground for courage during persecution in the fact that the Lord is our helper: “*So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’*” (Hebrews 13:6). Our

confidence that is rooted in our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the courage to be “*confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*” (Philippians 1:6).

Today, we remember and give thanks for the life of Mary of Nazareth, a young woman whose faith in God’s promise gave her the confidence and courage to accept the word spoken to her by the angel Gabriel and to become the mother of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. We first meet Mary in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, where she is described as “*a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.*” (Luke 1:27). While we know very little about Mary’s background, her life up to this point may have been similar to the lives of young women in her hometown of Nazareth, a young woman known by her Hebrew name Miriam who looked forward to a future similar to those of the women with whom she had been raised:

- “Miriam of Nazareth, rooted and nurtured within the traditions of the old covenant, would have been taught how to keep her home kosher, how to wash pots correctly and avoid food forbidden in the Old Testament. She could patch worn garments and weave homespun wool. When Jesus says, ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment’ (Mark 2:21), he must have been thinking of his mother mending his torn clothes in their humble home in Nazareth.” – Jenny Robertson, *Mary of Nazareth*.

Mary’s hopes and dreams for her future – raising her family with her husband in the familiar surroundings of her hometown – are disrupted when she is visited by the angel Gabriel, who suddenly appears and proclaims “*greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.*” (1:28). The angel’s words echo the words of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (“*Let your servant find favour in your sight.*” – 1 Samuel 1:18) and parallel assurances of power and favour given to the judges of Israel (“*The angel of the LORD appeared to [Gideon] and said to him, ‘The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.’*” (Judges 6:12). Mary’s reaction to the sudden appearance of the angel is one of caution and confusion: “*But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be*” (1:29). Gabriel responds to Mary’s initial response with a word of reassurance – “*do not be afraid, Mary*” – followed by staggering announcement. Mary has not only found favour with God, but Mary is going to be the mother of a child who she will name Jesus, a child who “*will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*” (1:32-33). This announcement echoes past

promises spoken to David, where God declares that *“he shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me ... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”* (2 Samuel 7:13-16). Gabriel’s announcement to Mary proclaims that *“God’s promises to David were about to be fulfilled in a way David could not have imagined.”* (Alan Culpepper). In response to Gabriel’s announcement, Mary asks a question reminiscent of Zechariah’s query to his call to be a prophet: *“How can this be?”* (Zechariah 1:18). In indicating that she is a virgin, Mary is not only stating a biological fact but expressing her fears over what might happen if it is found that she is carrying a child that is not her husband’s, a situation that could result in her being put to death (*“If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death”* – Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Gabriel’s response emphasizes that the baby would be born by the power of God: *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”* (1:35). Like the presence of God in the cloud at the Transfiguration, the Holy Spirit will be the one who will make this possible. The angel points to his encounter with Elizabeth, Mary’s relative; if a woman who was barren could bear a child, then Mary could be sure that what had been told her would come to pass; for *“nothing will be impossible with God”* (1:37). Gabriel’s words echo the angelic message to Sarah (*“Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”* – Genesis 18:14) and Jesus’ declaration that *“what is impossible for mortals is possible for God”* (Luke 18:27). *“It is a promise in the future tense: with God nothing will be impossible.”* (Culpepper).

The focus now shifts to Mary and how she responds to this sudden and remarkable announcement. While God has chosen her to be the mother of the Saviour, God would not force her or compel her to obey; it is Mary’s decision whether or not she accepts what has been announced by the angel. Her response echoes the words of Hannah when she declared *“let your servant find favour in your sight”* (1 Samuel 1:18). The Annunciation would not be complete without Mary’s trusting, obedient response: *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* (1:38). Mary becomes an important example of one who is obedient to God even at great risk to self. She has even been identified as the first disciple of her son, *“because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done”* (Raymond Brown). Even as the angel departs, *“her mission remains, and with it matures her inner closeness to God, a closeness that in her heart she is able to see and touch”* (Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI).

Mary's work as a disciple of the child she is carrying in her womb continues as she proclaims the good news in one of the most beloved hymns of the Christian faith. The Song of Mary (known by its Latin name *Magnificat*) turns to the effects of the Lord's coming for all God's people. As with the Annunciation, the song celebrates God's promise to Israel through the generations and declares their fulfillment. Only one verse speaks directly to the current situation, when Mary sings that God "*has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call be blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*" (1:48-49). The Song of Mary owes much of its inspiration to the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel, in which the mother of Samuel also sings out in praise of God: "*My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God ... There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God*" (1 Samuel 2:1-2). Mary identifies herself with the lowly, foreshadowing both the promise of exaltation of the lowly later in the Magnificat ("*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*" – 1:52-53) and the fulfillment of this promise in the ministry of Jesus ("*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*" – Luke 6:20-21). Mary's words of praise, however, speak of God's redeeming work not as something that will happen in the future but as already having been fulfilled: "*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever*" (1:54-55).

- "Such is the confidence of faith. More than predictions of what is to come, the Magnificat praises God for the goodness of God's nature and the redemption that Israel and the church have experienced ... The basis of our trust, hope, and commitment should be clear: God is our Saviour." – Culpepper.

We give thanks on this day for Mary of Nazareth, a young woman whose confidence in God's promises made her both the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and a role model of how the confidence of faith provides strength and courage to endure even the most challenging moments of life in the comfort of God's holy and certain hope, in the blessed assurance that "*his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation*" (1:50). Mary witnesses to the confidence of faith that "*comes to experience the works of God and thus attains to the love of God and leads to songs and praise of God, so that the believer esteems God highly and truly magnifies him*" (Luther). Mary's song "*looks forward to the heart of the gospel, the 'Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1) ... Miriam, the young unmarried girl in*

Nazareth, is called into the heart of the mystery. And she rejoices in the Lord.” (Robertson).

- “‘My soul magnifies the Lord.’ Mary sings right there in Elizabeth’s living room, ‘and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.’ Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first to hear her song, but it is not just for them. It is also for her, Mary, and for the Mighty One who has done great things for her. It is for Gabriel, who first gave her the good news, and for all who will benefit from it – for the proud and powerful who will be relieved from their swelled heads, for the hungry who will be filled with good things, for the rich who will be sent away empty so that they have room in them for more than money can buy. Her song is for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – for Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

While it is not a prayer of our tradition, we can join with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters on this day as we sing “*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.*” We “hail Mary” on this day as we give thanks for the life and witness of this remarkable woman, who embodies the confidence that is ours when we place our faith and trust in the God whose steadfast love endures forever, the God whose word is trustworthy and true, the God who will bless us and abide with us even in life’s most difficult, uncertain moments. The confidence that was promised to me in that fortune cookies was based on the root of that word; it was “with faith” that I gained the strength to trust where God was calling me in those anxious times. We look to Mary as a guide through the times in which we live; we know that through the son of Mary we have the assurance that the Lord is with us, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in the fruit of Mary’s womb, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.