

Advent 4B  
December 21, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Luke 1:26-38

Having a Mary Heart in a Jonah World

Several years ago a lady named Joanna Weaver published a women's Bible study entitled, "Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World." This study revolves around the story from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke where Jesus goes to visit in the home of Martha. Also there is Martha's sister, Mary – not to be confused with Mary, the mother of Jesus. This Mary and Martha are believed to be the sisters of Lazarus.

The text says,

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."<sup>1</sup>

So this story – and the study written by Joanna Weaver – centers on the many distractions that women face in their lives. It addresses the struggle that many women face: to really love and serve Jesus without struggling with weariness, resentment, and feelings of inadequacy. The study encourages women to draw closer to Jesus, deepen our devotion, strengthen our service, and to do it all with less stress and greater joy.

Nearly every women's group I've been in contact with has done this study at some time or another. I think this bears witness to the struggle that we all have, to not get so busy we don't hear the word of Jesus.

This is an especially tough struggle for all of us, man or woman, at this busy time of year. Can we take time out to hear the word of God in the midst of our busyness, or do we let our busyness carry us away?

But I'll be honest with you – I'd probably be much better served by a study entitled, "Having a Mary Heart in a Jonah World." Maybe I'll write that book some day. In such a book I'd contrast the ways that the Old Testament prophet Jonah responded to God's leading in his life to the example we have in today's Gospel text of Mary, the mother of Jesus, responding in faith to God's direction for her.

Do you remember the story of Jonah? The story starts out like this:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.<sup>2</sup>

I'm sure you remember the story from there. A great storm comes up while the ship is at sea. The sailors aboard suspected that God had brought the storm because of someone who was aboard, so they cast lots to see whose fault the storm was. And the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah finally confessed that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Looking to quell the storm and save their own lives, the sailors threw Jonah overboard. Jonah was swallowed by a big fish, and three days later was spewed out on dry land. Finally Jonah had learned his lesson and went to Ninevah to proclaim the message that God had given him.

So why? you might ask, would I say that I would be better served by a study on "Having a Mary Heart in a Jonah World"? Well, you see, one of my nicknames is Jonah. Remember Pastor Seibel, the gentleman who preached at my installation service? He gave me that nickname. I was absolutely floored the first time he called me that; by calling me "Jonah" he had his intended effect – he got my attention.

I received my definitive call to the ministry in 1992. Voice of God and all that kind of stuff. But despite having heard the voice of God in a very unambiguous way, I still rebelled. I still thought my life was my own, to do with as I pleased. I struggled with God, perhaps even wrestled with Him. Why couldn't Pastor Seibel have called me "Jacob" instead? But "Jonah" I was.

This all took place one day back in the mid-90s while I was talking to Pastor Seibel on the phone. I was complaining bitterly that I was having no professional success. You see, I had already given up any hope of ever being able to afford completing my bachelor's degree, which was a necessary prerequisite to seminary studies. So I'd thrown myself into my career, such as it was. At that time I was the assistant to the director of business services at a hospital. I knew how to do every job there was in that department, and even though I wasn't a supervisor, the supervisors looked to me for guidance. But when a supervisor's position became available, I was passed over for promotion in favor of someone fresh out of college, with no experience in the healthcare field. And to make matters worse, I was tasked with training her into her new position. Yeah, you could say I was bitter about it.

So in the midst of this conversation, Pastor Seibel says to me, "Okay, JONAH." I stopped dead in my tracks. "Huh?!?" I said. He said, "You heard me.

Jonah. You know why this isn't working for you?" "No," I responded. He said, "Because this isn't what you're meant to do. God has other things in mind for you."

And he was right. It was after that conversation that I reconciled myself to working a job – not a profession – in the meantime, waiting until God would open up the rest of His plan for my life.

I wonder how my life would have been different if, instead of responding to God's call like Jonah, I had responded like Mary in today's Gospel text? Mary asks only a single question of the angel before submitting herself wholly to God's will for her life. She says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."<sup>3</sup>

So, in contrast to Jonah, we have Mary. A girl, probably only a young teenager, when she is visited by the angel Gabriel. She has this awesome experience of being visited by an angel. And you have to understand: Angels in our Biblical times were terrifying creatures. They weren't the warm and fuzzy things that we so often like to envision nowadays, and they were certainly no soft-spoken "Touched by an Angel" in the mold of Roma Downey. Angels were frightening. This was certainly Zechariah's response when he encountered Gabriel earlier in this same chapter. And this is why angels so often began their visits by saying, "Do not be afraid."

But look at how Mary responds to Gabriel. We're not told that she was frightened. She was *perplexed*. Even so, Gabriel reassures her with those words, "Do not be afraid." Then he proceeds to outline what God has planned for her.

And aside from her one question, dealing with the purely practical matter of how she would have a son since she was still a virgin, Mary's response to Gabriel is one of pure faith. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."<sup>4</sup>

Now I doubt that any of us will be visited by an angel giving us such clear instructions as Mary received. But I wonder, if we were a little bit less like Martha, a little bit less caught up in our busyness, would we be better able to hear the guiding word of God in our lives? Or, do we struggle with having heard that guidance and instead respond like Jonah with thoughts like, "Not me, Lord!"

I think that the members of this congregation do quite often respond in faith to the guiding of the Lord. When you bring items for our food pantry or cook for Faith Kitchen, you are hearing the cry of those in need and responding in Christian charity. When you make these facilities available to those in Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, you are hearing and responding to those who are in need of support. And even during this busy holiday season, when you pass the bell-

ringers of the Salvation Army and choose to stop and throw in a handful of change, you're responding to those in need.

But yet I wonder... Is the Lord calling us to do something new or different, and we're just too busy or strong-willed, like Martha or Jonah, to respond to the call? Is it possible that God is calling us to something new and different? And if so, will we be able to respond purely in faith, like Mary, and let God worry about the details?

I don't have any answers for you. I don't know if God is calling us to something new and different. But maybe you do. Maybe you've heard God calling you to a new ministry for quite some time. If this is the case, I'd certainly like to hear from you! I'd like to be able to support each and every member of this congregation in reaching out to our community in new and creative ways. I'd like to be able to help each one of us respond to God's call with, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

<1,690 words>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:38-42

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 1:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:38