

SIGHT UNSEEN - BY FAITH, MARY  
A SERMON BASED ON JOHN 19:25-30  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
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10:00 a.m.

We have a lot of, what I think are,

perhaps unfair expectations of our faith.

Some of these unfair expectations come from poor teaching.

There is some prosperity gospel teaching out there.

Basically the premise of that teaching has

God getting treated like a surefire investment portfolio.

Give to God,

it'll come back to you tenfold.

It's a good teaching if you are the preacher cashing in

on your flock's sacrificial generosity.

However for most of the flock,

it's a financial drain hole

and false hope.

Some of the unfair expectations come from ignorance.

We can try and build faith on

half of a Scripture verse superimposed over a sunset.

“With faith all things are possible.”

“Just believe.”

With poor teaching,

and half truths,

and our own lack of knowledge about what is actually in the Bible

and without the skills to interpret it,

we end up putting unfair and unhelpful expectations

on our faith.

Why would God allow this to happen to me?

This isn't how I wanted things to go.

That's not what I want for me, my family, my church, my world.

Something happens

and because of unfair and uninformed and unhelpful expectations,

our faith collapses.

I see it often.

When people don't train.

They can't endure.

This is why I especially appreciate it, when the Bible  
lets us journey with an individual,  
especially when it is over a period of years  
or even decades,

Whether it is Moses, or Abraham, Jeremiah, or Paul  
when you walk with them,  
you are spared the experience  
of a half verse printed over a picture of a sunrise.

You get to see what a life of faith actually looks like  
over time, over a lifetime in some cases.

You get to see that faith requires endurance  
and endurance requires training.

Paul summarized his journey of faith for those in the Corinthian church  
who were questioning his commitment and credibility.

He wrote

“I have worked much harder,

been in prison more frequently,  
been whipped more severely,  
and been exposed to death again and again.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods,  
once I was pelted with stones,  
three times I was shipwrecked,  
I spent a night and a day in the open sea.

I have been constantly on the move.

I have been in danger from rivers,  
in danger from bandits,  
in danger from my fellow Jews,  
in danger from Gentiles;  
in danger in the city,  
in danger in the country,  
in danger at sea;  
and in danger from false believers.

I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep;

I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food;

I have been cold and naked.

Besides everything else,

I face daily, the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

Sounds great. There's a sign up sheet at the information desk.

When watching people in faith

I very deeply appreciate Mary, mother of Jesus.

I appreciate her for her courage.

I appreciate her for facing down the implications of her obedience.

She is often venerated as the mother of Jesus.

But when we hear the angel say she is highly favoured among women,

we too quickly default to a posture of

faith as a means to reward.

When the angel Gabriel showed up he said,

'Greetings favoured one.

The Lord is with you!'

Her reaction was not false humility.

Aw, gee, thanks.

Her reaction was not pride.

I've been waiting for you to get it!

Her reaction was 'greatly troubled'.

She was shaken. Her world was shaken.

She began to wonder what it meant,

what it meant to be highly favoured.

We can be guilty of thinking that highly favoured by God,

means an easy ride, or winning the lottery.

It is the unfair and unhelpful expectation of faith.

We think follow God - you will be highly favoured.

You will have health.

You will have money.

You will have a happy marriage and untroubled children.

You will have a dream job and a dream house and dream car.

We hear that Mary is highly favoured by God and think,

'wow, she gets to carry the Son of God.'

Like it's carrying the flag in for your country

at the Olympics or something.

Mary was too smart for that.

She wondered about this greeting.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God!

The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

You will become pregnant and give birth to a son,

and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,

and 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 never end.”

You will be Queen mother. Highly favoured.

But Mary wondered about the greeting.

I can only imagine what Mary would have had running through her head.

I think the thing I most admire, respect

and wish to emulate in Mary,

is how, by faith, she ponders.

Ponder isn't a word we use any more.

We click.

We tweet.

We reply all.

We push notifications.

We don't ponder.

We don't think carefully.

We don't meditate, ruminate, or deliberate.

Mary heard she was highly favoured.

But it gave her so much to ponder.

By faith

You will be pregnant, without being married, without being with a man.

You will bear the shame of being pregnant out of wedlock.

You will run the risk of the death penalty

when others believe you to have broken your engagement.

By faith, you will carry the burden of risk

in telling Joseph,

of trying to explain to your family and friends

that you really had a visit from an angel,

that you have not been with a man,

You will have to try and convince those closest to you  
that God has been at work in your life.

All of this came to pass.

So far so good.

Mary had every reason to be confident that,  
in the words of the Oklahoma musical  
'everything's going my way'.

But when she and Joseph took Jesus to the temple,  
just 8 days old,  
and ready to be dedicated,

Simeon approached them.

He was old.

He had been given a word from God that he wouldn't die  
until he saw the Messiah.

I imagine him looking like an Old Testament prophet,  
as a man who others listened to.

He held Jesus and said to God,

“My eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.”

Then, looking at Mary and Joseph he said,

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel,  
and to be a sign that will be spoken against,  
so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.

Mary marvelled at what was said about Jesus.

Then Simeon said to Mary,  
a sword will pierce your own soul too.  
There was much to ponder.

On the one hand,  
here was the promised Messiah,  
promised by an angel,  
delivered as a miracle.

On the other,

she had journeyed to Bethlehem from Nazareth,  
nine months pregnant,  
with swollen feet, and sore back,  
only to deliver this king, this Son of God,  
in a stable, with only a feeding trough to lay him in.

What does one make of that?

Shepherds came.

And Magi, wise men came, with gifts.

She treasured these things,

and these things too, she pondered in her heart.

The Magi had put Herod on notice.

There was word of a new king.

They became refugees in Egypt,

fleeing the wrath of a despot.

Jesus was raised in Nazareth.

It was a small town in the far north.

They couldn't be further removed from influence.

It wasn't very Queen Motherly.

On the annual trip to Jerusalem for Passover,

there was the year Jesus stayed behind

and didn't tell his family.

He stayed in the temple courts,

asking questions of the teachers.

Those who heard him were amazed,

amazed at his questions, but also at his understanding.

Mary was amazed Jesus didn't tell his parents where he was.

She had the genuine parental moment of having feared for his safety.

Scripture says,

“When his parents saw him,

they were astonished.”

Which I think it could be translated as,

‘Can you believe this kid?’

Mary said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us like this?’

Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’

Mary had a lot to ponder.

On the one hand there was an angel saying

“You are highly favoured.” a few years ago.

But her saying, “He might not make it to adulthood  
without me killing him.” today.

But by faith, I won't.

But here again, something I deeply admire, respect

and wish to emulate in Mary,

is how by faith, she ponders. She considers.

Hers was a posture of meditate, ruminare, and deliberate.

By faith, she continued the journey.

There is something to be said for pondering.

For considering and taking the time to reflect and let things unfold.

You've heard me tell the story

but its pretty familiar, you've likely heard it elsewhere too.

It is about an old farmer

who lived in ancient times.

He was the envy of his rather small village  
because unlike most of the other farmers, he possessed a horse.

One day, however, his horse ran away  
and his neighbours who soon heard of his misfortune  
were quick to offer him words of consolation.

“What a shame that you’ve lost your horse; how sad.”

The old farmer responded.

“Perhaps it’s a bad thing; perhaps not. Who knows?”

Then a week after the horse ran away,  
it returned to the old man’s farm accompanied by another horse.  
Now the farmer had two horses.

“How fortunate you are,” said his neighbours.

“Now you have not one but two horses.”

“Perhaps I am fortunate, perhaps not. Who knows?” said the farmer.

Three days later, the farmer’s only son was thrown from the new horse  
while trying to steady it and his arm was badly broken.

“What a shame” his neighbours chorused once again.

“Well maybe, but maybe not, said the farmer. Who knows?”

The next day, the ruler's army passed through the village  
looking for conscripts to serve and fight in the war  
that had recently been declared with a neighbouring province.  
The old man's son was passed over because of his injury  
while the other young men from the village  
were forced to join the other soldiers.

Who knows? It's worth pondering.

When they were at the wedding in Cana.

Mary saw that the hosts had run out of wine.

She told Jesus about the problem.

Then she said to the servants.

"Do whatever he tells you."

She had confidence and faith in who he was.

But then, as Jesus was growing in popularity

as Jesus started teaching to crowds,

a woman called out from the crowd.

'Blessed is the mother

who gave you birth and nursed you.'

It was a shout-out to Mom.

Jesus did not reply.

“Yeah, my mother is special. And I’m grateful.

Thank you for blessing her.”

He said,

“Blessed rather are those

who hear the word of God and obey it.”

Jesus. It’s your mom.

There was the occasion she wanted to speak with him.

It’s recorded in Matthew 12.

“While Jesus was still talking to the crowd,

his mother and brothers stood outside,

wanting to speak to him.

Someone told him,

‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside,

wanting to speak to you.’

It’s a good moment for, “excuse me a moment, I’ll be right back.”

Instead Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother,

and who are my brothers?’

Pointing to his disciples, he said,

‘Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven  
is my brother and sister and mother.’

Ponder that Mary.

And yet.

There was the healing of the paralyzed man.

The raising of the girl from the dead.

Sight restored to the man born blind.

And Lazarus. My goodness. Lazarus.

Four days in the tomb and Jesus brought him out.

So there was that to ponder.

By faith, Mary continued.

She paid attention. She watched. She followed.

Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem was the worst.

She was witness to the justice of convenience,

her son the healer, flogged,

All who said they would follow him, abandoning him

Peter betraying him.

There the ignominy, humiliation and physical brutality of the cross.

Simeon's words returned and struck hard.

"A sword will pierce your own soul too"

In today's text we hear Jesus release himself from his mother's grasp.

"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother,

his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas,

and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother there,

and the disciple whom he loved standing near by,

he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,'

and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'

Despite being words ensuring her future care,

they were still words of release, of letting go.

Here is your son. Not me. Him.

And a sword pierced her soul.

Mary was a person who pondered.

She was a woman who was able to repeatedly say

“Perhaps it is a bad thing; perhaps not. Who knows?”

By faith, she pondered.

Pondering requires humility.

It requires openness and patience and grace.

It is not reactive. Or quick to conclude.

Pondering, itself, is an act of faith,

a willingness, to not be able to see the horizon,

and trust anyway,

and move toward it anyway.

It is a willingness

to have your soul pierced as by a sword,

and worship anyway.

In the words of author Nancy Guthrie,

“ I don’t want to change God’s mind.

His thoughts are perfect;

I want to think his thoughts.

I don’t want to change God’s timing.

His timing is perfect;

I want the grace to accept his timing.

I don't want to change God's plan.

His plan is perfect;

I want to embrace his plan,

and see him glorified through it.”

To do what Nancy Guthrie writes, requires the willingness to ponder,

to continue, by faith,

without having it all figured out,

to continue, by faith,

when it seems there are contradictory messages happening

to continue, by faith,

when all you can do is ponder.

It is a call to a life of faith,

until what is only ponderable becomes sure.

Perhaps it's a bad thing; perhaps not. Who knows?

It is life by faith.

The very last we hear of Mary the mother of Jesus  
in the Bible occurs in Acts 1.

Jesus, resurrected from the dead,  
ascends into heaven.

There are angels. Again.

Mary could probably tell them apart by this point.

The angels said to those gathered,  
who were looking up after Jesus.

‘Why do you stand here looking into the sky?’

This same Jesus,  
who has been taken from you into heaven,  
will come back in the same way  
you have seen him go into heaven.’

They all went back to the upper room in Jerusalem.

No doubt pondering.

He has gone up into heaven.

Perhaps it’s a bad thing; perhaps not. Who knows?

Back in the Upper Room,

these disciples all joined together constantly in prayer,  
along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus,  
and with his brothers

For no doubt,

there was much to treasure in all these things  
and much to ponder in their hearts.

No matter what it looks like today.

Ponder it in your heart, by faith.

It is evident that God is always up to more than we realize.

Treasure these things.

By faith, ponder.

Amen.