

“Down to Earth Obedience”  
Luke 1:26-38

In thinking about obedience, the movie “Christmas Story” comes to mind where the little boy Ralphie wanted a BB Gun for Christmas but everyone around him seemed to think that it was a bad idea because he might shoot his eye out. Let’s watch this (Slide): <https://youtu.be/qgjPa5JkecA> . And then when Ralphie gets hit from the kick back of the gun, what does he do? Here is the clip of his plan for dealing with the problem (slide): <https://youtu.be/kZUTkgfZqZc>

What motivated Ralphie in this situation? It was fear of punishment. Most of us learn to obey the rules because of fear of punishment. This is not always bad because we have to have rules in society where people don’t hurt others or live recklessly without consequences. The problem comes when fear becomes the motivation for our actions, especially when it comes to our relationship with God. Much of religion throughout history has been motivated by fear. The comedian George Carlin once joked about religion saying this (Slide), “Religion has actually convinced people that there’s an invisible man -living in the sky -who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever ‘til the end of time. But He loves you...and He needs money.”

Our images of God tend to reflect our systems of fear in the world and their punitive nature. That is why when it comes to obedience, we have to do some unlearning of the old systems to allow God’s love to be the motivation of our action. There is no better example for obedience motivated by love than the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Her vision of the angel and her mystical experience with the news of her call to be the mother of Jesus were motivated by a loving obedience that was deeply rooted in her love for God. We will listen to the story in three parts to explore the incredible wisdom in it for us today.

This first part of the story is incredible (Luke 1:26-30) because of the drastic **disruption of plans**. Mary was preparing for a wedding. She was preparing to leave her family home to her husband’s home. The plan for her life was all figured out for her. She was doing what every young woman would be doing at that stage in her life in that society. Mary’s biggest “liability” (or maybe gift) was that she must have had a lifestyle of prayer and an active relationship with God. She had a vision! She heard the voice of an angel who spoke to her words of blessing. As in most cases when we come face to face with the sacred in a powerful way, humans feel scared. When the systems of fear and control had taken root in us that an encounter with something that we cannot control or understand can really throw us off our “normal” way of being in the world. When our reality shifts and the things we know and have become so familiar to us are infused with an awareness of God’s presence, it can be scary. The first lesson from Mary’s example is her openness to the sacred and to disruption of plans and ideas. Obedience that is not motivated by

punishment begins with wonder and openness to mystery. Learning to let go of our control over life in order to allow ourselves to get in touch with the mystery of the divine takes commitment and openness to change.

The second part of the story (Luke 1:31-37) teaches us that God's call on our lives is not always clear and does not always seem possible. **Obedience requires us to trust God in the face of what seems to us as impossible.** When Mary received the invitation to be the mother of Jesus, she wondered, "How can this be?" The call seemed impossible for her.

How many times do we find ourselves saying, "How can this be?" We may be able to be obedient and to be open to mystery, but it is hard for us to step out in faith based on words we hear in a vision, a dream, or a time of prayer. The answer of the angel was not very detailed. It just gave Mary the big picture that God will be with her on the journey. There were no details beyond that! She had to do this based on faith! Obedience that is driven by our love for God is about trust and knowing that fulfilling our purpose on earth requires that we rely on God to guide us each step of the way. We would rather have a masterplan that we can hang on to for security and control. But that is not how faith or life work! Mary had to trust that things would work out. Even though everything seemed impossible from a human point of view, she had to trust that nothing is impossible with God. Her ancestors, Sarah and Hannah (women who had special pregnancies), had to trust in the same promise. The same is true for us. When you look at your own call and you see all the roadblocks, you have to trust that things will work out with God's help and guidance, especially when things seem impossible. I remember three years ago, when we had a consultant by the name of John Holm working with us on how to renew and revitalize our congregation, we got scared about how we could implement all the changes that were needed. In his wisdom of faith and years, John told us, "If you are not scared, then you don't need to rely on God."

The third part of the story (Luke 1:38) is Mary's response which indicated that **she believed in her own potential.** Mary had a choice! She could have just walked away from all of it. She could have had a predictable and comfortable life. Her obedience didn't come from a place of fear or needing to please God because she was afraid of God. Her big yes to God came from deep within her.

Mary believed that she was to be the one to bring the long-awaited Messiah into the world. She was the one to take the challenge to bring God's presence to the people of Israel in a special way. She was the one to be an agent of God's radical transformation of the social structures of her country and of her people. God gave her a message of love and grace that turned her whole world upside down. Mary's yes was a great risk from the perspective of the world. **Obedience to the divine will is about believing in our own potential.**

Let's take a few moments to discuss the three lessons about obedience from Mary's example: 1. Disruption of plans 2. Trust in the face of the impossible 3. Believing in our own potential.

As we consider “Down to Earth Obedience” today, I invite you to consider your motivations for obeying God’s invitations and action in your life. Let go of fear of punishment to embrace the joy and mystery of aligning your life with God’s vision. This does not make life easy or without any problems. It just means that we are able to live out of a sense of connection to God and to life. In the season of Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, look at the example of Mary and follow her pattern of prayer and faith.

I want to share with you today a modern-day example of such obedience. It is from the life of a man by the name of Franz Jägerstätter. He was an Austrian peasant who opposed Hitler. He was a conscientious objector. He could not reconcile his Christian faith with participating in the evil of Nazism. His family and even his church leaders didn’t understand where he was coming from. They opposed him and urged him to just fit in. The result of his obedience was execution. But in the larger picture of history and of life, Franz lived a full and faithful life.

<https://youtu.be/nMtrwfz6p5M>

There are prayer cards that you were given when you walked in. They are words from Joyce Rupp. I would like to invite us to take a few moments with music to meditate on them. I will read them slowly. I invite you to listen to them as an invitation from God to greater trust and faith:

Will you believe that I love you without any reservations?  
Will you trust me?  
Will you let me be your strength?  
Will you let go of your own strong control?  
Will you walk with insecurity for a while?  
Will you open up your heart?  
Will you be vulnerable with me?  
Will you place your hand in mine?  
Will you take me to the places in your heart where you hide out?  
Will you unburden your heart to me?  
Will you talk with me about what is really difficult for you?  
Will you wait patiently for me to revive your spirit?  
Will you say yes to the growth I offer you?  
Will you stand close to Calvary and learn from me?  
Will you believe in the power of my resurrection? Amen.