

A psychologist friend of mine once told me that he had found the perfect formula for getting through Christmas. (Now remember this is from a man at Christmas!) He said, “You just put your mind in neutral and go where you are shoved!” I know he was just kidding around. Both men and women have so much to do at Christmas time. The decorating, the card writing, the gift buying, the baking—if you like the kitchen!, parties, wrapping gifts, church programs, heavy traffic near the mall, (I think it was a real sign of the season that an electrical transformer blew at Hamilton Commons this week causing real chaos!) long lines, frayed nerves, the bills, the deadlines, the pressure—well, it’s enough to make your mind go into neutral—or overdrive!

A few years ago, I lost about 3 weeks of the Advent season to a bout with pneumonia. And it changed my mind somewhat about what is actually *necessary*. I found out that I could rearrange things. A few things were put off until after Christmas—and it didn’t ruin it! I learned that I could relieve some of the stress and craziness.

When we get in the frenzy of it all, we miss so much. Now, truly, I’m talking to myself as much as I am to you—but we need to enjoy this beautiful season. Savor it. Celebrate it. Have the joy of Christmas with others. Honestly feel the joy of Christmas. Christmas has a lot to teach us.

Take Mary and Isaiah, for example. We hear about them every Advent. That’s because there is a lot to learn from them.

Isaiah lived in tough times. His people, the Israelites, were under attack, and they had gotten away from God—so far away that Isaiah knew they needed a savior—that was the only hope. Isaiah also knew that the people needed him—a prophet—to call them back to faith and to give them hope. He saw the need. He heard the call, and how did he respond? “Here I am, Lord. Send me!” Isaiah is the embodiment of faith and hope.

We see it even more dramatically in Mary. Mary has so much to teach us about real faith and real hope.

Mary was just a teenage girl from a poor family who lived in a little village. Her country had been conquered by the mighty Roman Empire. Then one day, out of the blue, an angel appears to her with a message from God: “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great. He will be the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world.” (Luke 1:30-32 paraphrased). Remember, all of this was going to happen before Mary had ever been with a man.

Now be honest. If this happened to you, would you think it was just a dream? Would you think you were hallucinating? Would you believe it? The remarkable thing is—Mary did believe! That’s called real faith and real hope!

But, being human, I bet she still had to have some real doubts and questions in her mind. How would she tell her parents? How would she tell her fiancé Joseph? What would he do when he heard the message?

You know, when we see her so beautifully portrayed in Christmas pageants and on Christmas cards and in Nativity scenes, she always looks so serene and lovely, always dressed in calm blue and white robes, a tiny smile on her face, so simple and sweet. And yet, nothing could be further from the truth of her situation.

Think about it—here was Mary, very young, not yet married, and going to be pregnant. She knew what to expect—whispering behind her back, the pointed fingers, the accusations, the raised eyebrows, the questions, the gossip, the criticism, the family pressures, the crude jokes, the cruel laughter. (You know people haven’t changed in two thousand years! When people hear something bad about someone, it’s great conversation. Gossip is still gossip!). Beyond the personal issues, they were faced with poverty and heavy taxes. They didn’t know it yet,

but they would be traveling just when the baby was due. And then, when they get to their destination, there would be no place to stay except a stable, with no midwife, no medicine—nothing but faith and hope in God.

It was a tough situation for Mary, and under similar circumstances most of us would have told the angel to find someone else. (In fact, one of my professors in seminary had the idea that Mary was about the 10<sup>th</sup> girl Gabriel had asked that day! The other nine said NO!) But Mary's answer for the angel is a real model of faith and hope. She says, "Here am I. I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38 paraphrased).

With both Mary and Isaiah, we get to see three powerful ways to respond to God with faith and hope. Let me tell you what I mean:

First of all Mary and Isaiah were people of great hope because they heard God's voice. You see, they were tuned in to God. They were listening with ears of faith, and so, they were able to hear God's message—when it came to them—and respond.

I really believe that God is speaking as loudly and clearly today as he spoke in the Bible, but we're just not "tuned in" to hear him. So many of us get caught up in the hectic pace of life, we just stop listening. We're so inundated by words and voices and talk and technology in our noisy world, we pull back into a hard shell and sleepwalk our way through life. We have ears, but we do not listen and we cannot hear.

Richard and I are friends with a younger couple who had their first baby about six years ago. That first summer with the baby, we were at their house one night on the back porch with a few other couples. The baby was already in bed upstairs. We were all talking and laughing—you know how it is, a few conversations going on at the same time—a lot of laughter and joking around. Suddenly, I noticed my young friend Celina, get up and go into the house. Amid all the happy sounds of the people around me, no one else heard the baby—but the baby's mother did. And you know why, don't you? Because she was tuned in to hear her baby's cry. She was listening for the baby. Her ears were trained to hear her baby's cry. He was her number-one priority.

And that's the way it was for Mary. Mary was tuned in to hear God.

One of the great questions I have for you at this Christmas time is this: Can you hear the baby? Are you tuned in to hear God? Above all the chaos, can you listen for God? Is that a priority for you? Or are you so busy and stressed that you've closed down that part of your mind?

Mary's hope and Isaiah's hope were great because they heard God's voice.

Secondly, Mary and Isaiah were people of great hope because they obeyed God's call. In the original New Testament Greek, the word for faith is *pistis*, and it literally means, "believing obedience,"—hearing God's call on our lives and committing to doing God's will come what may.

There's a cute Peanuts cartoon where Linus keeps the statistics for Charlie Brown's baseball team. This is his report to Charlie Brown: Linus says, "I've compiled the statistics on our baseball team for this season. In 12 games we ALMOST scored a run. In 9 games the other team ALMOST didn't score before the first out. In the right field Lucy ALMOST caught 3 balls, and she once ALMOST made the right play." And then Linus says, "Charlie Brown, we led the league in ALMOSTs!"

I'm afraid that's the way it is for a lot of people with regard to obeying God. They "lead the league in almosts." They **almost** obey God, but not quite.

Mary's words and actions and Isaiah's words and actions were not tentative or conditional. No, in both cases it was total and complete obedience to God, no matter how tough the task.

Let's be honest here, I doubt that most of us aren't asked to do really difficult tasks for God. But are we ready to do even the small stuff?

And finally, Mary and Isaiah were people of great hope because they trusted God's power. Both Mary and Isaiah took things one step at a time, one day at a time, and trusted God for the future.

Richard and I used to go sailing in the Chesapeake every summer. One night at a restaurant, we met a ship's pilot—the man who boards the cargo vessels at the mouth of the Chesapeake to steer the boat up the channel to Baltimore harbor. Richard said to him, "After all these years of navigating the bay, I guess you know by now where all the shoals and sandbars are." (Places where you can go aground.) The captain answered, "No but I know where the deep water is!"

In effect, that's what Mary said, isn't it? "I know where the deep water is. I know there are going to be some rocky places ahead of me, but I trust God to keep me afloat."

Do you remember the name Terry Anderson? He had been the chief Middle East Correspondent for the Associated Press when he was kidnapped in Beirut, Lebanon in 1985. He was held captive by terrorists until 1991 (six years). Terry Anderson went through an incredibly difficult ordeal, but he came through it all with amazing strength.

After his release, he wrote books and articles and was interviewed many times. He was asked many times what enabled him to survive the awful experience. He almost always answered, "My fellow prisoners and my faith"—which can be seen as another way of saying trust in God. He was also asked why he said he did not hate his captors. Terry's reply was, "I don't hate anybody. I'm a Christian....and it's really required of me that I forgive, no matter how hard that may be, and I try to do that."

One reporter asked, "Terry, did you ever lose hope?" Terry answered, "That's a hard question. Of course I had some moments of despair, but fortunately, right after I became a hostage, one of the first things that fell into my hands was a Bible. Over my six years in captivity, I have spent a lot of time with the Bible....and that helped me so much because it's about hope, it's about trust in God, and that's what gave me the strength to make it through each day." And Terry added, "You do what you have to do. Faith helps you do what you have to do. I spent a lot of time with the Bible and it reminded me to do the best I could each day....and to trust God for the future."

This past week, we witnessed yet another bout of gun violence right here in our state (Jersey City). The gun battle between the terrorist and police went on for a couple of hours. The people of Jersey City said they thought they were in a war zone.

We need to remember that 2000 years ago God came at such a time as this. Hopeless people, anti-Semitism, soldiers, poverty, violence. God came personally to us to give us hope. And while things sometimes seem out of control right now, we as Christians believe that someday God will set things right. God is still in charge, even when people are out of control. That is the hope we cling to.

Because of Christmas, our hope is secure. We can trust in a reliable God who comes through on all promises, who comes to each of us as one of us. Because of Jesus, we know that nothing can ever come between us and God. When we trust, that is exactly how we can become people of great hope.

***Please keep the following people in your thoughts and prayers ....***

**Prayer List:** Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Janelle, Garo and Bobbi.