

December 9, 2007

Matthew 1:18-25 / Luke 1:26-38

## When God Asks Ordinary People to Do Extraordinary Things

A few months back Nancy and I went with the Hills to see the movie "Amazing Grace," a movie portraying of the life of William Wilberforce, and his courageous yet exhausting and sometimes agonizing struggle to abolish the slave trade in England.

It starts off a bit slow, but it's a powerful movie about an ordinary man called by God, and moved by his Christian convictions (sometimes haunted by his Christian conscience) to do an extraordinary work against great odds. If you haven't seen it yet, it's well worth your time and the expense of renting it.

The same could be said of many such people throughout history:

They were ordinary people called to carry out extraordinary tasks.

And I'm not speaking of the "super gifted" whom we usually hear about. People of extraordinary brilliance like St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, Jonathan Edwards (who mastered Latin by 11 years old, and Greek and Hebrew by 13 years old — the age, by the way, that he entered Yale University)!

I'm not speaking of people like C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ravi Zacharias who all fall into the "extraordinarily gifted" or "genius category" (off the charts type genius!) and thus don't really rank as what I'd call "ordinary" people, since they had extraordinary intellectual abilities before they ever became Christians.

We could say the same for other super-achievers — people like Michelangelo in the field of art, Bach or Beethoven in the field of music, or William Carey, the missionary to India whose extraordinary linguistic gifts enabled him to translate the Bible into Sanskrit and 23 other Indian dialects in his lifetime (a task almost unthinkable in 1792 when there were no computers or data banks or word processors)!

Or take Charles Spurgeon whose command of the English language, keen imagination, pastoral wisdom, and photographic memory enabled him to be one of the greatest preachers who has ever lived. He also was exceptionally gifted.

But that's not the type of people I'm not talking about! Being extraordinarily gifted from birth, they were what I will call "unfairly disposed toward greatness and extraordinary things" before they ever set out to do anything! "All men," as I have often pointed out, "were NOT created equal!" It takes only a momentary glance at history to see that some are born with innate natural gifts and abilities that others could only wish they had.

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But today I'm not talking about the super-gifted. I'm talking about the more ordinary type people. Regular people like you and I — the people Abraham Lincoln was speaking about when he said, "God must have liked ordinary people, because He made so many of them!" People who aren't extraordinarily gifted from birth, but are called by God to do extraordinary things anyway.

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People like George Mueller, who in terms of just about everything, was pretty much average, yet felt called by God to live by faith, and though he struggled immensely at first (often having just enough to get by) ended up building and staffing an orphanage for 2000 children, feeding and clothing them without ever asking anyone for a penny!

Yet after his death it was estimated that he prayed 7 million dollars through that orphanage in his lifetime, without ever asking anyone but God to meet his needs and the needs of the children. An ordinary man called by God to do an extraordinary thing – and he did.

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We could say the same thing about Gladys Aylward, who has been called "The Little Woman of the Inn of the Sixth Happiness." Her most pronounced "gift" was her intense stubbornness, her devotion to Jesus, and refusal to give up hope or take no for an answer.

"Young and naive enough to trust God to lead her," writes her biographer, "she left England (bound for China) with no support, less than ten dollars, and no mission board."

WHY? Because the mission board she applied to rejected her. Her qualifications, she was told, were too slight, her education too limited, and the Chinese language considered beyond her ability to grasp.

Yet she simply desired to do God's bidding at any cost — and she did. During the Sino-Japanese war of the 1930's, when Japan invaded China, she led over 100 orphans — "poor little waifs that no one else wanted" — on a long journey over hundreds of miles through the mountains to safety.

Those are the type of people I'm talking about. Ordinary people, with ordinary gifts, and an average intelligence — some well-known, and some lesser-known, and some too humble to even want their stories told.

Some like Carrie Sydenstriker, the mother of Pearl S. Buck, of whom Ruth Tucker can write: She "would have been lost in obscurity, like so many other missionary women, had it not been for her biographer, her illustrious daughter, the Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist."

And I say all that, because if you want to fully grasp the immense significance of God's choice of Mary to be the woman who would bear the Christ Child, then you have to understand she as well was little more than your ordinary, average, not too noteworthy, devout and committed believer.

And I don't say that to put her down in any way! I say it because that seems to be her own estimation of herself. One of the first things we notice about Mary, after Gabriel goes to Nazareth and says "Greetings Mary" ("Ave Maria" in the Latin), and is told that "the Lord is with her," and that she is "highly favored," her immediate response was to be suspect or taken back by such a greeting.

She immediately wonders, as we are told in verse 29, "what kind of greeting this might be?"

In other words, the news that she was "highly favored by God" took her totally by surprise! WHY? Because she was apparently the last person on earth that she would have considered to be "highly favored by God"!

She seems to have had an honest, realistic, sober estimation of herself, and knew that she was just an ordinary Hebrew girl, as R. Kent Hughes points out, somewhere "between the ages of 12 and 14 years old."

It's a strange twist, then, that the church of the Middle Ages, all due to a mistranslation of the Greek, which rendered the greeting as, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," went on to essentially deify her, making her anything but the ordinary girl she was!

Raymond Brown, the primer Catholic New Testament Scholar even admits that the rendering "full of grace" is too strong — a rendering that gave rise to the medieval idea that, "Mary had every gift, not only spiritual but secular, even above those given to the angels." An idea that gave birth to the false notion that she, being full of grace, could, in answer to prayers offered to her, dispense her excess grace to others.

It was a belief that eventuated centuries later (in December of 1854) with the thought that unlike every other human being excepting Jesus, she was “immaculately conceived” without any stain of a sin or imperfection. “Mary,” Hughes goes on to say, “would have been scandalized at the thought.”

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You see, rather than being a dispenser of grace that overflowed from herself, the passage declares that she was, like any other devout yet sin-stained saint, a recipient of the of a grace that overflowed from God — unmerited favor.

To be “favored” is to be shown grace. And to be “highly favored” is to be shown and extraordinary degree of grace — grace, which as Luther rightly noted, was “undeserved favor,” and not a reward for some type of meritorious virtue.

“It must be emphasized,” says Darrel Bock in his Commentary on Luke, “that despite (her) qualities, God’s choice of Mary to bear this child springs from His grace, not from any inherent merit that she possesses. She is the object of God’s unmerited, graciously provided goodness.”

A fact confirmed by her reaction of perplexity to the news that she is said to be highly favored.

“She did not ask for, or seek this role in God’s plans;” he goes on to say, “God simply stepped into her life, and brought her into His service. Her asset is that she is faithful (and open to serve God).”

Mary, then, was a recipient, not a dispenser of grace; worthy to be imitated for her faithfulness and openness; not worshipped or adored for god-like perfections.

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You see, that’s essentially my point for today: Mary was an ordinary girl — an ordinary Hebrew girl 12 to 14 year old (possibly up to 15-16 years old at the most) — faithful, thoughtful, and obedient to God, and thus a worthy example of godly devotion for us to follow or imitate.

Yet you know what the problem is? It’s such a common tendency for religious people (or “church going folk”) to so elevate and overly exalt the hero’s of the faith, that we make them into surreal people, who possess superhuman abilities, virtues, or faith, and in so doing make their faith and their obedience and their virtues and their achievements something we may admire, or wish we had, but never really seek to possess or achieve, because they are so beyond the reach of our “averageness,” or “ordinariness” that we wouldn’t even bother trying.

That's why it's important to remember what the Gospel's try to hammer home again and again: That except for Jesus, the people in the Bible were simply ordinary everyday people just like you and I.

They were carpenters and uneducated fishermen. Tax collectors and prostitutes. Doctors and revolutionaries. Fallen men and women who struggled and balked at the possibility of phenomenal miracles happening to them, like Zechariah who didn't believe (as we saw last week in verse 18) and Mary who struggles to believe (as we see this week in verse 34.)

They were people who doubted, disbelieved, got angry, wanted to hurt people, and DID hurt people! They were competitive, proud, had wrong priorities (which Jesus had to rebuke), were cliquish and excluded those who didn't believe just like them, were slow to learn, often stubborn, sometimes downright unteachable and fell prey to sin and temptation.

They were boastful, went back on their word, got depressed, gave up hope, and acted in a hypocritical way. They forgot who they did and didn't baptize, occasionally fell prey to unforgiveness, refused to obey, lacked polished speaking ability, experienced unanswered prayers, and insulted those they were preaching to!

Need I go on!? No. It's all there in plain view of anyone who reads the Bible. In fact, its one of the things that caused my Professor of New Testament to say he knew the Gospels had to be true, because NO ONE wanting to start a new religion would have written a story which made themselves look so utterly inept! You just don't do that type of thing if you want people to admire you.

You don't make yourself look so ordinary, flawed and human -- unless, of course, your purpose in writing is simply to be honest and forthright and truthful and real and transparent — not trying to put anything over on anyone!

You see, the purpose of the writers of Scripture is not to compete with Jesus for the admiration of people, but to so contrast themselves with Jesus (and how far short they fall from being like Him) that there is no question as to just who is the Christ.

It's a lesson many of us have often failed to internalize! We are to strive for godliness, never being content with any degree of progress (be it real or perceived), but at the same time we must be starkly honest about our failures and shortcomings, lest people come to admire us, instead of

the Jesus, who by the abundance of His grace, makes any degree of godliness possible in the first place!

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And so we come back to our original premise — the clear message of Scripture — that God calls ordinary people (not superhuman people) to do extraordinary things for Him.

And what I'd like to look at in the time we have remaining are the 3 things necessary for ordinary people like us (or like Mary) to be able to achieve extraordinary things!

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And the **FIRST** (whether we like it or not) is obviously the divine prerogative, or the grace and favor of God. Christianity is not a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” type of religion. It is not a secular “believe in yourself” type religion. We are not humanists whose faith is in some unlimited power and potential residing in the human spirit or psyche. Those who come to Christianity looking for that type of message will be sorely disappointed and realize they've come to the wrong place.

Because the clear and repeated message of Scripture is that we need the grace of God! We need Him and His power, and the hope, help, strength, boldness, courage and guidance His Spirit gives. We need the purpose and joy and self-control and discipline and perseverance and grace that His Spirit infuses into our hearts and minds and souls.

The “Christian’s Creed” is this: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and apart from Him I can do nothing!”

All Mary did, by the way, is believe that God would do what He said He would do! That’s it! Other than that SHE REALLY DIDN'T “DO” ANYTHING! She didn't try to muster up the faith to make it happen. / She didn't try to believe in herself. / She didn't scurry around trying to make herself worthy (she knew she wasn't). All she did was believe that God could and God would do what He said He would do — something which she did nothing to add to or make happen!

She did have faith, but her faith didn't play the slightest part in her becoming pregnant. It merely made her emotionally prepared for the miracle that would be done in her by God and God alone — without her assistance on her part.

And that, my friends, is a word from God to us. I mean I don't know about you, but I tend to think that because I'm so ordinary, I must push and strive and work and exhaust myself with continuous and unrelenting effort if anything extraordinary is ever to be accomplished in or

through me. Maybe you feel the same. Or maybe you feel you're so ordinary, and it's so unlikely, that you don't even bother trying!

That's why the example of MARY is so encouraging to us (that is, the REAL Mary and not the mythical, deified version of Mary). Because Ordinary Mary was asked to do an extraordinary thing, which essentially required little more of her than to make herself available for what God had sovereignly pre-determined He was going to do.

So when God speaks, and assigns you a task He wants you to do (usually discerned by the fact that we have an intense inward yearning to do it), don't fret about whether you have what it takes. Simply do what Mary did, and believe God can do it in or through you, and make yourself available for the task.

Then **SECONDLY**, like Zechariah, Mary also needed to move beyond her fears —and so do we if we are ever to accomplish anything significant for God, or be used of Him in extraordinary ways. Fear is one of the most paralyzing of emotions. It has kept many a Christian from stepping out to do the things God calls them to do, whether it be fear of how people will respond / fear of danger / fear of failure / fear of loss / fear of rejection / fear of risk / fear of being exposed to additional scrutiny / fear of not having all the answers / or fear of added responsibility / or fear of speaking in front of a crowd. Fear that we lack the skills, or abilities or competence or intelligence or people skills or stamina, or courage to do what God is calling us to do.

Yet that's the problem with fear, isn't it. It paralyzes us or holds us back because it gets us to focus entirely on us, and our inadequacies, rather than God and His ability to equip us for any task He might call us to. Fear tells us GOD is not able to equip or make us able to do what He calls us to do. In that sense fear lies to us, exaggerates the obstacles in our way, overly inflates in our minds possible negative outcomes, and tells us God can equip others, but not us. Yet I tell you right now, if its God that's calling you to do something, He will ALWAYS supply you with what is necessary to do it.

Mary was afraid too. And probably not for the same reason Zechariah was afraid, since the angel's initial greeting to her conveyed a message of grace and divine favor. We aren't explicitly told what she was afraid of — yet it does seem like it has to do with the nature of the greeting.

By the nature of the greeting she apparently sensed she would be asked to do something extraordinary — something that she, being so young, and so ordinary, and so inexperienced, would consider herself unable to do.

So what is the angel's first task? TO RID MARY OF HER FEAR! "Do not be afraid," says the angel. WHY? Because fear makes people hesitate, and hesitation gives them time to dwell on everything that may potentially go wrong, which only leads to MORE FEAR and MORE HESITATION until we end up being totally paralyzed and doing nothing at all!

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Had Mary, as a 13-14 year old girl, dwelt on her "ordinariness," and lack of experience in relation to the task she was called to do, surely fear of failure, or fears of being inadequate for the task would have caused her to back out.

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Had George Mueller dwelt on his "ordinariness" and been told from the start that He would be called to build, and staff an orphanage for 2000 children, housing, clothing, feeding, and educating them (never asking anyone but God for any need) fear of being unfit for the task would probably have caused him to shy away from the task, thinking he couldn't possibly be the man to do it.

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And if Gladys Alyward (the lady rejected for her obvious lack of ability to be a missionary to China) had ever been told she would be caught in a war, and then expected to lead over 100 war orphans 100's of miles over mountainous terrain to safety, with no food or supplies, she may have agreed with the mission board who rejected her and said "You're right, I'm not the person for the task."

Even when the call to do so did come to her, she balked, until a little Chinese girl who reminded her of what she had taught them from the Bible, saying to her, "Do you remember when God called Moses, that he took the children of Israel through the Red Sea...and every one of them got across safely?" Do you believe it? the little girl asked. "Yes," she said. "I would not teach you anything I did not believe."

"Then why don't we go...? the girl asked. To which she responded, "Because I'm not Moses!" And with the force equal to a physical blow, she says, the answer came back to her: "Of course you're not, but Jehovah is still God!" Which brings us to the remedy for so much fear: Getting our eyes off our own ordinariness or inadequacies (which we all have) and looking instead to the power, and favor and grace of Jehovah to equip us to do any task He calls us to do.

I repeat it again, "If it's God that calls you to do it, He will equip you with whatever is needed to do it." That's what the angel assures Mary to rid her of her fears. "Courage," said Luther, "is not the absence of fear, but a refusal to capitulate to your fears." A refusal to let your fears keep you from doing the things God calls you to do.

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And **LAST**, God doesn't ask you to believe in yourself, He asks you to believe in Him, and then simply offer yourself, and commit yourself unreservedly, to the task He calls you to do. After being told of the task she is being called upon to do, Mary does not say, like the little train that could: "I now think I have what it takes."

No! She simply says, "I am the Lord's servant...may it be to me as you have said." In other words, "I belong to You Lord. I am here for no other reason than to be of service to You. Take me and do with me what You will."

You see, Mary doesn't concern herself with where she's going to get the parenting skills or wisdom to raise the Christ Child once he's born! She doesn't! God doesn't even make that an issue. In fact, the only thing she's told she has to do is offer herself for the task and give the baby the name Jesus when it's born. That's it!

And if we had that mindset (a mindset Jesus would later admonish His disciples to adopt) we'd do a heck of a lot more for God! Because what God wants us to focus on is OBEDIENCE in the present, not SUCCESS or POSSIBLE FAILURE in the future! God wants commitment to His will in the now, for today, not worry about all the possible problems down the road!

That's what God wants from us — a will surrendered to His. A heart that trusts Him to supply whatever is necessary to do the task He calls us to. And a commitment to follow through even when hard times come—like lack of money when you're living by faith alone; or wars breaking out and orphans to be fed when you have no supplies!

That's not your concern. As one longtime missionary friend in Honduras used to say: "That's God's problem, not mine." We are simply to do what He tells us, and He must supply what's needed to carry out the task!