Sunday, November 30, 1986
MARY: ROLE MODEL
Luke 1:26-35, 34-38

When you think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, what kind of image comes into your mind? A sweet young innocent woman? A peasant girl? Or do you think of those statues of Mary that are seen in some churches or in religious bookstores?

Actually, the New Testament of the Bible doesn't tell us very much about Mary. She is not physically described, so we don't know how she looked, whether she was short or tall, thin or stout. We don't know anything about the family she grew up in, and whether or not she had brothers and sisters; or how old she was when Jesus was born or how old she was when she died. After the death and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament accounts, we hear almost nothing more about her.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, doesn't even mention her name — he refers to her only indirectly. Here's his statement about her in his letter to the Galatians: "When the time had fully come, God sent the Son, born of woman, born under the law."

But there are lots of traditions about Mary which grew up alongside the New Testament. Most of them see her as a devout young peasant woman, probably sixteen or seventeen years old when she became pregnant with Jesus. According to these traditions, her mother's name was Ann. Still another tradition holds that her husband, Joseph, died before she did and that she had to raise the family as a widow. The New Testament does mention that Jesus had brothers and sisters.

Even though the New Testament doesn't tell us a lot about Mary, the Gospel of Luke gives us enough information so that Mary's story and her faith have something to say to us about our own story and our faith.

According to Luke's account, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you," and in effect told her that she had been chosen by God for a special purpose, she replied, and I paraphrase, "Wait a minute, I want to know more about what this means before I get too involved."

It shows, of course, a lot of astuteness in Mary. She was not a passive character. No doubt she had learned through experience that "there is no such thing as a free lunch." Or maybe she didn't want to get her expectations too high. Perhaps she wanted no disappointments; so, no more expectations. The angel Gabriel brought her what was supposed to be good news, yet she was deeply troubled by it.

That is not unusual though. As a matter of fact, oftentimes we too are troubled or a little afraid of what's supposed to be good news for us. Someone says, "Hey, I've got a great opportunity for you." We hear it and we're likely to say, "Wait a minute, what's the catch?"

After being reassured by the angel that the birth of her child would be good news for the whole world and there would be nine months of preparation and adjustment, Mary accepted God's assignment. She was not expected to deliver immediately. As time passed, she would become more and more aware of what the birth of this child would mean for the world.

And so it is that many good things that happen to us need a time of preparation, a time of adjustment, a time to grow and mature — a time of expectation and waiting.

All through the announcement, the pregnancy, and the birth of her child, we see in Mary a person who is faithful, and her trust in God is total and unashamed.

Too often Mary has been described as a kind of passive instrument, but the Gospel stories imply something different. We see in her a confident, questioning, decision-making human being. The Gospel of Luke makes Mary an active participant in the drama of Jesus' birth.

Some time ago I saw a headline in a religious journal which said, "Mary may emerge as a significant model for today's women." That would be tragic, then half of humanity would miss Luke's point. Luke perceived Mary as a significant model for all of us, women and men, in at least these three ways:

Luke presents Mary not as a goddess, nor a stiff statue gathering cobwebs in a musty cathedral, nor a plastic figurine molded with a sweet and innocent countenance to stand lifeless in a coffee-table creche. Luke's Mary is a genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship and response to God's word. She was willing to let God be born through her. Meister Eckhart said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born."

A second way that Mary is a role model for all of us, male and female, is found in a story that is included in three of the four Gospels. We are told that Mary and the brothers of Jesus wanted to see him, but Jesus was surrounded by a crowd and they couldn't get his attention. So they sent word that they were there and wanted to talk with him. When Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were there, he used it as a teaching situation and pointed out that whoever does the will of God is "my mother, brother, and sister." The Gospel writers do not tell us why Mary wanted to see Jesus at this point, but she no doubt heard the answer Jesus gave, and even though it was difficult, she learned that she could not have Jesus all to herself whenever she wanted him. No one has an inside track to Jesus or God more than anyone else.

So we recognize in Mary the struggle of all believers to overcome the temptation to keep Jesus to ourselves, to want privileged access to him.

And in a third way, Mary is a role model for us. She followed Jesus to the cross. She was there when he died. Most or all of the other eleven disciples were nowhere to be found. She was also a part of the early resurrection church. The Book of Acts describes her as being with the disciples in the upper room after the resurrection.
Mary and the other women around Jesus, who were all faithful disciples, remind us that in Christ, and therefore in God's community, there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Amen.