

Today we are finishing up our sermon series called *Models of Faith: Celebrating 50 Years of Women in Ministry in the United Methodist Church*. For this sermon series we have looked at strong women of faith that appear in Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus and in the story of the birth of Jesus.

We have looked at Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, Elizabeth and today we turn to Mary. As we get started today, I want to ask you, have you ever felt like you were in trouble? Have you ever felt in over your head?

I received an e-mail recently that I found pretty funny. Not long ago someone was having work done at the car dealer. A Blonde woman came in and asked for a seven-hundred-ten. They all looked at each other, and the mechanic asked, "What is a seven-hundred-ten?"

She replied, "You know, the little piece in the middle of the engine. I lost it and need a new one. It had always been there."

The mechanic gave the woman a piece of paper and a pen and asked her to draw what the piece looked like. She drew a circle and in the middle of it wrote 710. He looked at the picture and couldn't figure out what on earth she was talking about. So he took her over to another car that had the hood up and asked, "Is there a 710 on this car?"

She pointed and said, "Of course, it's right there."

Are you ready to see what it is? Okay (Put up the picture of an oil cap).

Isn't that great? The woman wanted an oil cap. But she was reading oil, upside down and backwards, so it became 710. The mechanic was in trouble. He just didn't know what she was talking about. He was clearly in over his head. But he is not the only one who has ever been in over his head. I have too. Do you know what it is like to be in over your head? What did you do? Where did you turn?

If you have ever felt in like you were in trouble, if you have ever felt like you were in over your head, I believe this scripture for today has something to offer us. I don't think we can really understand these words of joy, unless we understand the challenges Mary has already faced. Mary is an unwed, pregnant teenage mother in a world that doesn't take kindly to unwed pregnant teenage mothers. In fact, Mary's very life is at risk. She could be punished with death or at the very least labeled for life because of this.

**The first thing Mary doesn't do is she doesn't give up in face of adversity.** She doesn't so focus on the problem that she can't see past the

problem. Sometimes, when problems strike us all we do is focus on the problem, so much so that we can't see past the problem. Has that ever happened to you?

**The second thing Mary does is she looks past the risk of her situation to focus on the hope that God offers.** She turns to Elizabeth and when greeted by a loving relative, she finds a companion to walk with her through the challenges she will face. Mary turns to a friend/relative to help her see God and all that God is doing in her and through her.

I believe this story is a reminder to us that we need to turn to each other and lean on each other as we seek to focus on the hope God wants to offer us. I know people who try to handle life and life's problems all on their own. They end up facing addictions, and even suicide. Because they give up. They lose hope. They only focus on their problems.

Who is it that you could turn to, to help you find God in the face of the challenges of life? Who could be your Elizabeth, during times of stress? Who would you be willing to touch to encourage and bring hope to this Christmas?

Three years ago, a little boy and his grandmother came to see Santa at Mayfair Mall in Wisconsin. The child climbed up on his lap, holding a picture of a little girl. "Who is this?" asked Santa, smiling. "Your friend? Your sister?"

"Yes, Santa," he replied. "My sister, Sarah, who is very sick," he said sadly. Santa glanced over at the grandmother who was waiting nearby, and saw her dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "She wanted to come with me to see you, oh, so very much, Santa!" the child exclaimed. "She misses you," he added softly.

Santa tried to be cheerful and encouraged a smile to the boy's face, asking him what he wanted Santa to bring him for Christmas. When they finished their visit, the Grandmother came over to help the child off his lap, and started to say something to Santa, but halted.

"What is it?" Santa asked warmly.

"Well, I know it's really too much to ask you, Santa, but..." the old woman began, shooing her grandson over to one of Santa's elves "The girl in the photograph... my granddaughter well, you see... she has leukemia and isn't expected to make it even through the holidays," she said through tear-filled eyes. "Is there any way, Santa, any possible way that you could come see Sarah? That's all she's asked for, for Christmas, is to see Santa."

Santa blinked and swallowed hard and told the woman to leave information with his elves as to where Sarah was, and he would see what he could do. Santa thought of little else the rest of that afternoon. He knew what he had

to do. "What if it were MY child lying in that hospital bed, dying," he thought with a sinking heart, "this is the least I can do."

When Santa finished visiting with all the boys and girls that evening, he retrieved from his helper the name of the hospital where Sarah was staying. He asked the assistant location manager how to get to Children's Hospital.

"Why?" Rick asked, with a puzzled look on his face.

Santa told him what happened earlier that day. "C'mon.... I'll take you there," Rick said softly. Rick drove them to the hospital and came inside with Santa. They found out which room Sarah was in.

Santa quietly peeked into the room through the half-closed door and saw little Sarah on the bed. The room was full of what appeared to be her family; there was the Grandmother and the girl's brother he had met earlier that day. A woman whom he guessed was Sarah's mother stood by the bed, gently pushing Sarah's thin hair off her forehead. And another woman who he discovered later was Sarah's aunt, sat in a chair near the bed with weary, sad look on her face. They were talking quietly, and Santa could sense the warmth and closeness of the family, and their love and concern for Sarah. Taking a deep breath, and forcing a smile on his face, Santa entered the room, bellowing a hearty, "Ho, ho, ho!"

"Santa!" shrieked little Sarah weakly, as she tried to escape her bed to run to him, IV tubes in tact. Santa rushed to her side and gave her a warm hug. A child the tender age of his own son -- 9 years old -- gazed up at him with wonder and excitement. Her skin was pale and her short tresses bore telltale bald patches from the effects of chemotherapy. But all he saw when he looked at her was a pair of huge, blue eyes. His heart melted, and he had to force himself to choke back tears.

As he and Sarah began talking, she told him excitedly all the toys she wanted for Christmas, assuring him she'd been a very good girl that year. As their time together dwindled, Santa felt led to pray for Sarah, and asked for permission. The entire family circled around Sarah's bed, holding hands. Santa looked intensely at Sarah and asked her if she believed in God.

"Well, I'm going to ask God to watch over you," he said. Laying one hand on the child's head, Santa closed his eyes and prayed. He asked that God touch little Sarah, and heal her body from this disease. And when he finished praying, still with eyes closed, he started singing softly, "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright." The family joined in, still holding hands, smiling at Sarah, and crying tears of hope, tears of joy for this moment, as Sarah beamed at them all. When the song ended, Santa sat on the side of the bed again and held Sarah's frail, small hands in his own.

"Now, Sarah, "he said authoritatively, "you have a job to do, and that is to concentrate on getting well. I want you to have fun playing with your friends this summer, and I expect to see you at my house at Mayfair Mall this time next year!" He knew it was risky proclaiming that, to this little girl who had terminal cancer, but he "had" to. He had to give her the greatest gift he could -- not dolls or games or toys -- but the gift of HOPE.

"Yes, Santa!" Sarah exclaimed, her eyes bright.

He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead and left the room. Out in the hall, Sarah's mother and grandmother rushed to Santa's side to thank him. "My only child is the same age as Sarah," he explained quietly. "This is the least I could do." They nodded with understanding and hugged him.

One year later, Santa Mark was again back on the set in Milwaukee for his six-week, seasonal job which he so loves to do. Several weeks went by and then one day a child came up to sit on his lap. "Hi, Santa! Remember me?!"

"Of course, I do," Santa proclaimed (as he always does), smiling down at her. "You came to see me in the hospital last year!"

Santa's jaw dropped. Tears immediately sprang in his eyes, and he grabbed this little miracle and held her to his chest. "Sarah!" he exclaimed. He scarcely recognized her, for her hair was long and silky and her cheeks were rosy -- much different from the little girl he had visited just a year before. He looked over and saw Sarah's mother and grandmother in the sidelines smiling and waving and wiping their eyes.

That was the best Christmas ever for Santa Claus. He had witnessed the miracle of hope. This precious little child was healed. Cancer-free. Alive and well. He silently looked up to Heaven and humbly whispered, "Thank you, Gracious God. 'Tis a very, Merry Christmas!"

Sarah experienced healing in her life, because she had hope and she could lean on her family.

If you are here today and life has been tough and you are looking for hope. You have come to the right place. Because Mary shows us that when we focus on God instead of our problems, when we lean on people who can help us discover God and the hope God offers, we can experience Joy and Life.

May we discover the joy and life God offers us this Christmas.

Amen