The whole truth is always more powerful than just part of the truth. If you want to understand an author’s message it is much better to read the entire book, instead of just a few sentences. This is true whether we are talking about a novel, or a history book or a book of scripture. In a similar way, the varied, sometimes confusing mix of books in the Bible point to a much more powerful story than we would find in any single book. Such is the case with our scripture readings today. Chapter 7 of 2 Samuel and Luke chapter 1 point to a truth that is not fully expressed in either book alone.

In our reading from the book of Samuel, King David is at the climactic point of his leadership. David has not committed any grave errors up to this point. His record is more or less perfect, and his perfect record seems to be encouraging a sort of confidence that is not always helpful. King David says to Nathan, his advisor, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” This does not seem right to King David, so he makes plans to build a splendid temple out of cedar trees.

King David feels confident. King David feels certain about God. King David feels connected to God. King David wants to do the right thing by God and he wants it to be a very big thing. King David has it in his mind and in his heart to build a temple, a house for God.

It is at this very moment that, through the prophet Nathan, the Lord says to David, “No. It is not about your confidence. No. You shall never build me a house. No. Instead I shall build you a house. I shall build, out of you, a house. It shall be the house of David; the line of kings to lead my people Israel.” Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Some people are, like David, very confident in themselves and in their plans for the world. Some people think they know exactly what God has in mind in each specific situation. Other people are not so certain.

Mary was not so certain. Mary was just a normal, young woman. Mary did not have an enormous amount of experience, but Mary had obviously learned a lot in her 15 or 16 years of life. Mary probably did not have the opportunity to be a student, but if she had been a student I’m thinking she would have been one of the best in her class. Mary was not the most confident person. Instead Mary listened. Mary paid attention. Mary understood there was a whole lot about the world she did not understand. Mary was not so certain of her relationship with God.

When the angel spoke to Mary and said, “The Lord is with you!” Mary did not not pump her fists in the air and say, “YES! I knew it!” Mary was not certain. Mary was perplexed and afraid.

Mary was confused, even when the angel told Mary she would give birth to a baby who would be the Son of God, and that he would inherit the throne of David and that his kingdom would last forever. Mary did not say, “Fantastic” or even, “Glory Hallelujah!” Mary asked a question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary was not confident. At the very end of the passage she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” These are not words of confidence. These are words of humility. For me this is the greatest prayer in the entire Bible. The prayer
was not spoken by a leader, by a priest, or by one of the male disciples. The prayer was spoken by a young woman, a common person who was about to become the most famous unmarried, pregnant woman in the world. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

In these passages King David and the virgin Mary are nearly opposite. King David is an experienced war hero, the proud leader of the entire nation. Mary is not a hero, she is not proud and she is not the leader of anything. King David has almost absolute power; Mary is almost powerless. King David has prophets and advisers to guide his decisions. Mary has older, mostly unknown and unnamed, women to guide her. In the next chapters of his story King David’s confidence and greed will lead him to make tragic mistakes. In the next chapters of her story Mary will give birth to the one who is called “God with us. Immanuel.”

A profound truth is revealed in the contrast between Mary and David. Those who are quite confident about what God wants and their role in the fulfillment of God’s work are often tragically misguided. God seeks out those who are less certain about the ways of God. God leads those who don’t make presumptions about their role in God’s work.

If our goal is to be faithful in our relationship with God, if our goal is to be faithful in our relationships with each other, we have to be willing to be changed. We will never be changed by the power which we call divine love if we are certain about every last rule and detail. We will never be changed to work with the power of divine love if we are completely confident in ourselves and in the work we have planned.

I don’t want to sound disrespectful but King David was the greatest king in the history of the nation of Israel, and if you know the entire story of David you know that in many ways he was a complete jerk. Learn from his example. When it comes to the big things and the little things in life, do not presume. Try not to make assumptions. David was the one who made the greatest assumption. And David was completely wrong. And God said, “No.”

Instead, take heart when you find yourself feeling like Mary. I know this is not easy. When you are feeling perplexed or uncertain find the strength that is faith. If you are in a situation that is confusing or frightening and you are able to find some strength, understand the strength is not your faith in God. It is the faith of God, more like God’s faith in you, that is giving you strength.

This is counter-intuitive, but be careful about being confident. Try to remember Mary was confused and afraid. That was the moment when the revelation of divine love came into our world.