

Devotions – December 5-11, 2021

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Sunday, December 5, 2021

Mary, Mother of Jesus

Text: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Since it is early in the Season of Advent, it seems like a week looking at Mary during our daily devotion would be timely. So today, let’s meet Mary and her “predicament.”

By our standards, Mary was a young girl at the time of her immaculate conception. It is believed that she is between 12 to 16 years old and already betrothed to Joseph. I often ponder what went through Mary’s mind. I’ve talked to a few moms and grandmothers that had become pregnant at a young age. One of my students was only 12 when she conceived, kept the child and had a five-year-old son as a graduating senior! Another 14-year-old girl denied she was pregnant, wore bulky shirts to hide her “weight gain” and did not know why she was in such pain when she went into labor. Her teachers were told she was genuinely surprised to find out she was giving birth to a baby. These young women were all terrified, uncertain of their future, overwhelmed with the prospect of having a child, and filled with questions about what the future would hold for them. One of the main questions for them all was, “What are others going to think of me?” The others being, mom, dad, grandparents, siblings, the boyfriend, teachers and friends at school, people at church, and the rest of the family.

Mary obviously knew how conceiving a child happens. She had not been with a man and knew she could not possibly be pregnant. She asks Gabriel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” When Gabriel told her that the child was of God, one would think that Mary’s reaction would be no different than modern-day teenage girls. For her, having conceived a child not of her betrothed could have meant

death; her family might have stoned her as was their gruesome custom; Joseph, her betrothed husband, could grant her a divorce per se, to get out of the pre-arranged union that was not yet completed. Her family could disown her, and she would be an outcast in a culture that held women in very low regard and left to fend for herself in a hostile society. We can only surmise that these are the thoughts that quickly went through Mary's mind. However, we are not told of any thoughts of this nature. Instead, we read, "Mary answers, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." No arguments, just, "Here am I." To me, that seems like an unusual response. In most instances where extraordinary behavior is requested from God, Bible figures have a barrage of excuses, buts, and why they are unable to comply with God's request. Since Mary gives an immediate "yes," it is a great example for us on how we might answer God's requests of us. Tomorrow, we'll explore why Mary answered in this way.



Monday, December 6, 2021

Here am I

Texts: Genesis 3:15 and Luke 1:46-56

Genesis 3:15

And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.

Luke 1:46-56 (*MARY'S SONG*)

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

56 And Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) about three months and then returned to her home.

In the next verses in Luke, Mary travels over eighty miles to visit her cousin Elizabeth, then pregnant with John the Baptist, and stays there for three months. Upon her arrival, Mary's song, called the "Magnificat," is recorded in Luke. It is this song that tells us the why she answered so quickly, "Here am I, let it be done...." Almost word for word, she pulls this beautiful song from a variety of different Psalms, which means she had memorized a lot of Scripture. She strung together up to 15 different verses from different places to comprise her beautiful and meaningful new song. She knew Scripture by heart.... she probably could not read or write, but she had memorized and learned from what she heard including the ancient prophesy from Genesis. It is believed that young Jewish girls were taught to pray that it would be their seed to which God was referring in Genesis. Mary was very likely to have prayed for this event to happen to and through her own seed/offspring! Because she knew the Scripture so very well, she knew what a blessing was being bestowed upon her and very quickly answered, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

It has been my experience that most often when I believe God is calling me to do something, I find reasons not to do it, and more times than not, at least a momentary fear of "what will they/she/he think of me?" I pray I am getting better at answering God. The more often I act quickly, the easier it gets. The odd occurrence that helped me with this the most is one scene in a secular movie called, "We Bought a Zoo." The dad / actor Matt Damon, tells his son, "It only takes 20 seconds of courage to change your life." That short phrase truly impacted my Christian walk; it only takes 20 seconds of courage to walk over to someone and say whatever God has placed on your heart to say/do, etc. I take a deep breath, gather my courage from God, and move forward – 20 seconds- and God's work can begin.

Today I pray for 20 seconds of courage for all of you, to hear God's request, to answer, "Here am I," and to act on God's leading.



Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Text: Luke 1:30

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Mary was in great company in having found favor with God. Others were Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David. We think of these Bible greats and remember their amazing stories. However, we must also remember that finding favor with God, while a great honor, was not an easy task. Noah had to build an ark and face extreme ridicule; Abraham was asked to get up and move to a new place far away; Moses had to face none other than Pharaoh, David faced Goliath; and Mary eventually watched in great agony as her son hung on a cross. We must wonder if they ever thought, "Thanks a lot, Lord, for your favor!"

Finding favor with God came with great cost and great responsibility. I know for myself that the cost and responsibility are often the reason I do not always readily heed the call of God. As stated in yesterday's conclusion, I must find that 20 seconds of courage to get up and get moving into God's calling. If I do not, I feel shame, guilt, remorse, and separation from God. Learning that and learning what happens when I do walk into God's calling and say, "Here am I," it becomes so much easier to act. When I act as called by God, I experience God's blessings that fill my soul with peace, comfort, and joy. Mary experienced God's favor because of her willingness to be God's vessel. May we all learn from Mary and the other Bible "greats" as we willingly accept the cost and responsibility that come with obedience to God's call. We can face the future, not with fear, but with peace in our souls knowing God will be with us every step of the journey.



Wednesday, December 8, 2021

Text: Luke 2:2-5

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

I remember the night of October 1, 1981, so well. My son was born that night and the ride in the car to the hospital was only 15-20 minutes away. I felt every bump in the road, every corner turned, every step on the brake or acceleration of the gas; it was all so painful. With that in mind, I cannot even imagine how painful the journey was for Mary, be it walking for almost 90 miles, riding on the back of a donkey, or riding on a cart pulled by a beast of burden on a rough road, for a journey which took at least four to seven days or more. It is widely accepted that it was the cold and rainy season, there were dangerous animals, such as lions and bears near the heavily forested area along the Jordan River, as well as bandits and thieves along the way. More than likely, they probably traveled in a caravan of some sort. Whatever the means of travel or with whomever they traveled, it was not a fun trip. We must realize they had no choice but to go. The Romans were in charge and certainly had no empathy for anyone's condition, let alone a young pregnant Jewish woman. And when they arrived in Bethlehem there was no hotel room, no place to stay, but in the stable.

While we tend to romanticize the stable because our Savior was born there, it is not hard to imagine that Mary was discouraged and maybe even angered by her surroundings, especially with the knowledge that the baby about to come into the world was a holy child. There was not a clean bed in town anywhere for them. Did Mary cry in dismay? Did she grumble to Joseph? Did she curse the Romans that made them come to this place? Did she accept the news with gratitude at least saying she would not be giving birth out along the cold and wet road somewhere? Did she humbly thank the Lord for at least the dry, but cold stable? Whatever the discussion was, no one recorded it. None of the gospel writers were eyewitnesses to Jesus' birth, just second hand reporters of events that had happened decades earlier. The important part of their Gospel accounts is that Jesus was born and came into the world in unusual circumstances, born as a humble holy child, not as a privileged hero king storming in and taking charge.

Just like Mary, we do not always get what we want. God uses even hard circumstances to show his glory. Like the baby born in a small cold stable, some of our experiences, while seemingly small and unimportant, are significant to God's work. God's work / our hands... Our willingness to say, "Let it be done as you say," is the way God gets his work done in this world. What can you do today to be God's hands in the environments in which you live and work?



Thursday, December 9, 2021

Text: Luke 2:6-7

⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them at the inn.

Having been in a few barns, I am sure the stable was a smelly place. It is surmised that it may have been a cave-like structure in the side of a hill or possibly a livery-type structure directly under the inn for traveler's animals and a few sheep; whatever the stable was, it was a dwelling meant for animals and a very unclean environment in which to birth a child. Next, we must wonder if there was anyone there beside Joseph to assist in the birth? Was a midwife found? Was there clean water? Was there a bed of straw or hay fashioned for Mary to lay down upon? These questions are not answered, but the baby came nonetheless, was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in an animal's feed trough or manger. Of these events we sing and praise God. Did Mary think, what "favor" is this Lord; giving birth to the holy child in a dirty, smelly, pen where the animals live? Perhaps at first, I can almost hear her complaints to Joseph, as would any reasonable woman, but once the baby was there, cleaned up and wrapped snugly, as with most of us, Mary gazed into her child's face with wonder and awe at the miracle she saw before her. Not only the miracle of a new-born child, but the very child of God.

Throughout our entire life there may not be very many times when God makes himself known in a huge way, such as when a baby is born or when you walk away from a horrible head-on, highway speed car wreck as did my husband and I this past May. We were kept safe and are thankful to God we were given the gift of life. While the big miracles are obvious, there are probably a dozen miracles a day that might be hidden in pain or are seemingly so small we may not even notice them, such as the deer that was going to step in front of our vehicle but turned around. Today, let's look for and find God's miracles in our lives and rejoice in God's presence with us. After all it is the season of Immanuel – "God with us!"



Friday, December 10, 2021

Text: Luke 2:8-20

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

**¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"**

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

My husband and I recently purchased a quality telescope and have been watching the night sky. Especially exciting nights are when events are taking place, such as the Pleiades meteor shower in August or the Aurora Borealis is active, and not so long ago, Mars was at its closest orbit to the Earth, so we saw the red planet. My favorite object to look at is the moon, we can see right into the edges of the craters, very cool.

No doubt, the shepherds of Mary's time were able to look up to a much clearer and darker sky than we do through our light/polluted sky today, they could see more stars, see the Milky Way clearly and were unquestionably very familiar with all the sights of the night sky. The night in the Bible reading today though was like none other as they observed an angelic announcement and an entire angelic host singing praises to God. I am sure they were standing there frozen as they looked up to the angels in total astonishment. And it was this astonishment that they brought to Mary, in the smelly, cold cave stable, with the animals nearby. We are told, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Perhaps this moment was a part of the "favor" God bestowed upon Mary as she learned more from another source about the specialness of the little baby she had just birthed.



Saturday, December 11, 2021

Text: Luke 2:21-40

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.³⁹ When they had finished everything required

by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

One of my mother's favorite sayings was, "Life begins at 40." I often wondered what it meant, she never gave an explanation to me, but she sure said it a lot. Forty is an important number, not only to my mother, but there is significance attached to it throughout our culture, the Bible and in many different faith systems besides Christianity and Judaism. The events in today's Bible reading occur 40 days after Jesus' birth according to Jewish law. Forty days of rain, forty days on Mt. Sinai, forty years wandering in the desert; forty days of fasting and prayer; forty days from resurrection to ascension. Forty – used repeatedly throughout our Bible – so what of it?

Usually, forty in our Bible is referring to a time of trial and testing that leads to transformation and it may be a symbolic way of saying, "a long time." In today's reading Mary completes a time of waiting after giving birth to transform from unclean to clean. At the end of this purification time, forty days since Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph receive yet more verification of the specialness of the baby Jesus from both from Simeon and Anna. Upon seeing and holding the Baby Jesus, these two elders at the temple in Jerusalem offer glorious news of praises to God and salvation. However, their news also bears a clear message of coming sorrow, after which Mary was perhaps transformed in another way – she learns that "a sword will pierce her own soul" and fear about Jesus' future may have entered her life. It is indeed a foreshadowing of events to come, and we must wonder if Mary was somewhat overly protective with this news hiding in her mind. Did she fear for Jesus during his ministry, and oh how she felt the pierce in her own soul when her son was pierced on the cross. All these things were within God's request of her and the "favor" he found with her.

May we all be as obedient as Mary and gladly grab our 20 seconds of courage to step into God's will for our lives every day as we journey through our "forty" days of testing, trial, and transformation. Let us each hold onto the hope of Christ, knowing that our Savior is always with us; trusting that ultimately, we will be singing praises one day in glory, no matter what we walk through here in this earth.

Merry Christmas and Amen

