

As we prepare for Christmas, I wanted to share with you the most popular gifts this year. This is fresh, real world data you are looking at, hot off the press. (View the online sermon to see the items.) The most popular: a portable s'more maker. It burns for three hours. The entire crew can gather around the fire and roast marshmallows. For women, it's this purse. Not bad. For men, it's this sweatshirt. Really—all you can find for a dude is a plain sweatshirt? I know that guys are boring but come on. And the most popular gag gift: This spoon. Cereal killer. Clever! Christmas is the season of giving, because we remember and celebrate God giving the world the gift of His son.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas we are talking about the way God used specific people to welcome His son into the world. Last week Emerson talked about how God spoke to Zechariah about the birth of his son, John the Baptist, the man who would prepare the way for Jesus. Today, we get to talk about Mary. If you have your Bibles with you, turn to Luke 1. We'll pick up where we left off last week. We are going to spend some time reading through the story of Mary, how she found out she was going to give birth to the Son of God, and how she responded with faith, humility, and worship.

Let's take a look at the story.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:26-56)

It’s such an amazing story of how God decided to come into the world. It’s a familiar story to read this time of year, and I want to dive deeper into it to see what we can learn about Mary, what we can learn about God, and finally, what we can learn about ourselves. First, let’s talk about Mary and highlight ten specific attributes.

- **A virgin.** This fact is highlighted three different times in only 7 verses. She was not married yet; she had never been with a man. She honored God with her chastity, which ultimately allowed her to be used by God in a profound and beautiful way.
- **Engaged.** At that time, engagements lasted about a year. She had a fiancé, Joseph, a blue collar, working class man, a carpenter. The Bible tells us he was a righteous man who lived according to the Scriptures.
- **Young.** The Bible doesn’t give us her exact age, but in their day, people didn’t wait until they finished college and had 2-3 years of professional experience under their belts to get married. It was customary to get engaged following puberty; 13-17 years old would be normal. With almost complete certainty we can say that she was a teenager.
- **From Nazareth.** Nazareth was not a bustling, important, metropolitan city. Archaeological excavations tell us it was a village of just a few hundred people. She is from a very unimportant place.
- **Poor.** When it came time to present Jesus in the temple, the law required a lamb to be sacrificed. But if the family couldn’t afford a lamb, two doves could be sacrificed instead. Mary and Joseph gave two doves. They had no extra money in their bank accounts.
- **Highly favored.** This is literally what the angel tells her, “God’s favor is on you; His presence is with you.” Though she was a young woman with no family of her own, though she was a poor woman from an unimportant place who had nothing to offer in terms of the world, she had a purity of heart that caused God to choose her, of all the women in the world, to bring Jesus into the world.
- **Humble and willing.** When the angel told her that she would give birth to the Son of God, who would sit on Israel’s throne and establish an eternal kingdom, Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.” This is the posture that everyone of us should take no matter the request the Lord might make of us. Darrell Bock says this: Mary reflects the person whom God unexpectedly chooses to use. She brings no outstanding credentials to the task and lives on the edge of the nation. She brings nothing on her résumé other than her availability and willingness to serve. But those characteristics are the most basic ones anyone can offer God.

- **Curious.** The angel told her, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.” Now conceiving a son by itself is, of course, not a miracle. But because we are told three times that Mary is a virgin, for her it certainly would be. She’s never been with a man—and she knows how nature works—so she says, “How will this be?” Something is clearly not adding up!

A few weeks ago, my mom, who lives in Colorado, came to town. When I met her at the airport, I grabbed her bag. I almost threw my back out. It must have weighed 80 lbs. I said, “Mom, what do you have in here?” Presents for the kids! Grandparents in the room know what I’m talking about. When she got to see Hudson, she opened the bag and gave him one of her presents, which was a Spiderman costume. His eyes got so big; he ran to her and rushed to put it on. It came complete with a mask and gloves. As soon as Hudson was all dressed up, on his own initiative, he sprinted off and jumped on the wall, spreading all four limbs. He fell down hard, looked back and said, “Grandma, the spider man suit doesn’t work.”

Things weren’t adding up in his mind; can you imagine how much more things weren’t adding up in Mary’s mind? How was she supposed to have a child? “The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’” God’s miraculous plan is that Jesus would be born to a virgin, that she would conceive miraculously—God would come upon Mary in such a way that one of the eggs from her actual body would be fertilized by the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit so that the child inside of her would truly have a human mother and a divine father; this child would be, in the truest possible way, fully man (truly human) and at the same time fully divine. We’ll explain a little bit later why that is so important.

- **Blessed.** When her aunt Elizabeth sees her, she says, “Blessed are you among women,” meaning that of all the women alive, and all the women who have ever lived, God blessed her in a special way. It’s important to emphasize that in Catholic tradition, they have made too much of this and have gone far beyond what Scripture teaches. I went through the Pope’s tweets, and not only does he tell people to pray to Mary frequently, he also stated:
 - Mother of the Lord, Virgin Mary, Queen of the Rosary, from your arms come the hope and peace of which we are sorely in need.
 - Mary is the road that we must travel in order to reach God.
 - I entrust to the Virgin Mary all those who carry the burden of illness, along with their families and healthcare providers.

I am not trying to be disrespectful. But all that goes directly against what the Bible teaches. Every single prayer in the entire Bible is directed to God. Never once in Scripture do we see an example of a prayer or are we told to pray to anyone besides God, so praying to Mary is not biblical. More than that, Mary isn’t looking over us, giving us hope and peace; that’s what Jesus does. Mary isn’t leading us to Jesus; that’s the Holy Spirit’s job. None of that is anywhere in Scripture. We want to make sure that our faith and practices are grounded in God’s word, not human tradition. But here’s what we need to be mindful of: even though Mary is not who the Catholic church has made her out to be, even though we shouldn’t pray to her, she is still the mother of Jesus, the woman God chose to bring His son into the world, the one who carried Jesus in her womb, gave birth to Him, nursed Him, fed Him, provided for Him. She is still uniquely blessed, highly favored, and in the Protestant church, we need to look to her as a model and as an example more than we do.

- **Niece.** After Mary learned what would happen and availed herself to play a part in God’s plan, she rushed to meet Elizabeth, her aunt, who was herself pregnant with a baby boy who would grow up to be John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus. When Mary came into the house, her baby leapt for joy in her womb and Elizabeth spoke a blessing over Mary, encouraged her, and honored her for her faith in the Lord. This tells us something important: Mary learned that God was going to do something miraculous and unprecedented in her life, and she immediately ran to a friend to tell her, to confide in her, to seek encouragement from her. And Elizabeth provides just that. She is not suspicious, she is not critical, she doesn’t ask Mary how it’s all going to work; she simply champions the work of God in Mary’s life. What a gift for her to have someone older in her family to do that for her. And really, how wonderful to be able to experience pregnancy together with one of the closest people in her life. That’s something I’ve seen as a husband to a wife who is pregnant. When she’s with any of her friends who are also pregnant, I just slowly step out of the room. They get to talk about how their legs are feeling that day, how their back is feeling that day, if they threw up yet that day, what they are craving to eat, and of course, much more importantly, when they feel the baby move, how they are preparing the nursery, what name they decided on (unless they are one of those couples that decides to go stealth and won’t tell anyone the baby’s name until they are going into preschool!). Having a companion in pregnancy is such a gift. And God gave Mary a close friend in her family to experience it with her.
- **Worshipper.** This section ends with Mary singing a song of praise to God. She says in 1:46-47 “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She says “my soul” and “my spirit,” so she is speaking both about what is happening in her inner being as well as the encompassing quality of her entire life. She glorifies the Lord and rejoices in God. She is declaring the worth, the beauty, the majesty, and the greatness of God. She is delighting in the Lord. God is not a concept or an idea to her; He is the source of her greatest joy.

Those are lessons we learn about Mary. Mary also learned a lot about God through everything she was a part of. For example, she learned that God is near. This is the story of God choosing to become a man and walk among us. Contrary to the claims of the deists who say that God made the world and then, like a watchmaker, allowed His creation to run on its own, the incarnation means that God is closer than we could have ever imagined—not just close to us, but one of us. As Gabriel the angel says in Matthew 1:23, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means ‘God with us.’” Jesus was truly born from a woman. This isn’t a mythical tale of God simply visiting humanity. He was conceived from an actual egg inside Mary as the Holy Spirit supernaturally came upon her. He had a nine-month gestation, which allowed him to be, in the fullest sense imaginable, truly human, and at the exact same time, truly divine—fully man and fully God. This is the Christian doctrine of the incarnation: the second person of the Godhead has come to live among us. God is not far off—He is near!

Not only did Mary learn how near God was, she also learned that God is knowable. Before the incarnation, before God became man, there was no certain or complete way for us to know what God was like; our understanding of God was vague and nondescript. But God coming to us through Jesus at Christmas changed all that! “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). In other words, we didn’t know what God was like, but now he has taken human form and revealed his character and heart to us. Anytime there is a question about what God is like, we look to Jesus to find our answer. Jesus is the fullness of God in human form.

The incarnation means that God understands. God coming near not only allows us to know what God is like, it allows God to know what being human is like. God came near and learned what it was like to be

raised by imperfect parents, to have siblings, to learn to read and write, to work a normal job, to feel hunger, to face temptation, to get sick, to lose loved ones, to be betrayed and rejected, to be lied about and falsely accused, to face death. Because God became man, no matter what pain we may be going through, He understands. Hebrews 2:17-18 says: “For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” This would not be possible without the Christmas story.

Here’s another thing Mary learned about God: God redeems. When Mary is worshipping the Lord after finding out what would happen, she says, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She knows that God is coming near not simply to educate us and relate to us or be a great example for us, but to deliver us. And she personalizes it by saying that her son will be “my Savior.” The one she delivered would one day deliver her. The one she gave birth to would one day give her new birth. And not just for her, but for everyone.

This is something that God promised to do from the very beginning. We read in the Bible, in Genesis 3, that as soon as sin and death entered the world through Satan, God promised to enter the world and do something about it, and specifically to do it through the child of a woman. He spoke to the serpent, our spiritual enemy, and said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). God was promising to come into the world, through the actual child of a woman, through her offspring, to put a permanent separation between Satan and humanity, and to solve, once and for all, all the problems Satan has brought to humanity. Specifically, God said to Satan, “he will crush your head,” which means he will be totally defeated, but in the process, Satan will “strike his heel,” a reference to the crucifixion, which means that our deliverance comes at the price of Jesus’ life. God redeems; He buys us back. That’s the heart behind this illustration of Mary and Eve (view the online sermon to see the illustration). Eve is still holding the forbidden fruit, downcast and worried, the serpent coiled around her leg. Mary takes Eve’s hand, places it on her stomach, and reassures Eve that God is coming into the world to undo her sin, and the head of the snake is crushed. The wonder and glory of the Christmas story brings the entire narrative arc of humanity to completion.

We’ve talked about Mary, we’ve talked about God. Finally, I want to draw attention to how this relates to us, the claim and implication that the Christmas story makes on our lives. First, God wants to form Christ in our hearts. Just as God told Mary He wanted to form Christ inside of her, God wants to form Christ inside every one of us—obviously not in the unique and physical way that happened in Mary, but still in a very real and meaningful way. Ephesians 3:17 says, “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” God wants to live in you, to reside in you, to make your very life His home. That leads to the second point:

God is looking for willing, humble servants. Just as Mary decided to open her life to the plan of God, she resolved: “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.” God wants every one of us to say: “God, if you want to live in me, if you want to call my life your home and use me for your purposes and glory, I am your servant, may it be to me as you have said.” Let me ask you: are you willing and open to fully surrender to the Lord? To say yes to whatever plans He has for you?

That leads to a third point: We need friends to champion God’s work in our lives. Just like Mary was able to go to Elizabeth, a relative and friend, and find someone she could confide in, someone who could see what God was up to and celebrate that work and encourage her, we need that. We talk about life groups and community a lot around here, and this is one of the reasons. This happens almost every week in my group. God is doing something in someone’s life, He is forming more of Christ in someone’s life in a unique way. People get to share what God is doing and then a dozen other people get to say, “Yes, that is

what God is doing, I see that! God is shaping more of Christ in you. His favor and blessing are on you—continue on that path. It may be costly. It may be challenging. But let's walk it together." We need companions for the journey.

And then finally, we should praise God for becoming our Savior. Just as Mary responded with a song declaring the glory of God, as we reflect on Christmas, so should we. Just as Mary said, it wasn't only that God came to be the Savior of the world, He came to be "my Savior." Let that sink it. God became a man, was born as an infant baby boy who would ultimately be rejected and despised and killed on a cross, to pay for your sins, to bring you back to God. This Christmas season let's give God the praise He deserves.