

Journey from Fear to Surrender

Good morning Pathway! I hope we are doing well and staying safe as we count down to Christmas. I haven't always enjoyed Christmas...When I was little, Christmas was a big deal because I got new clothes, was sent off to church to play with my cousins and friends and came back home to a feast. But as I grew older and started to be conscripted into the preparations, it stopped being fun and I would just look forward to the next day so we could rest from all the cooking and washing up that followed. And then in college I started to go on mission trips that somehow ended just a few days before Christmas and I would get home on Christmas eve from a 15 hour bus ride exhausted, and would end up sleeping through half of Christmas day. We didn't really do presents or put up a tree so a special Christmas would be maybe going out to eat. Then I started working in church and Christmas turned into a work assignment, working tirelessly to get the Christmas service done and then arriving early and leaving late if you were the team on duty for that service. So along the way, I lost the wonder and joy of Christmas, and it became a chore that I couldn't wait to get over and done with.

Then I met David and he was ALL about Christmas. He'd start talking about putting up the tree in August and I'd be like, dude! Chill! But I must say that some of his enthusiasm has rubbed off on me in the last 7 years that we've been married and each year I've been looking forward to Christmas a little bit more than I did before. I've enjoyed thinking about what Christmas means and how we can share God's love with those around us in this special season.

I am excited to be kicking off our Christmas sermon series called 'The Journey of Christmas,' looking at the Christmas story from the perspective of different people to see what we can learn and how we can apply their lessons to our celebration this year. Today I will be looking at Christmas from Mary's point of view and her **journey from fear to surrender**.

Our passage for today comes from Luke 1:26 - 38.

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.

I went to a Catholic school for 10 years and so I grew up praying the Hail Mary, “Hail Mary full of grace. The Lord is with Thee. Blessed art thou among women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.” I used to be very intimidated by Mary because most of the depictions I saw of her made her seem completely “other”... this special woman who had found more favor with God than any other human being and who just readily and happily said yes to what was probably the most important thing God had ever asked of anyone. I couldn’t identify with her seemingly quick response to the angel, “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word be fulfilled.” My only encounters with Mary at the time were of her as a venerated symbol of faith that did not always cast her as an ordinary woman but in my mind, as a superhuman, super-spiritual other-worldly being. I feel like the danger of seeing Mary (or any other Bible character that we admire) this way is that it makes it hard for us to see ourselves in her. I couldn’t imagine just how good and godly and devoted I’d have to be in order to be chosen to birth the Messiah. It seemed like too high a bar for me!

When I heard, “blessed are you among women,” I thought it meant that God had identified her as being better than all other women and that is why He had chosen her. But as I’ve been rereading this passage I’ve realized that maybe there were some things I may have missed. I’ve come to believe that Mary was not chosen by God because she was more holy or special than other women; she became holy and special BECAUSE God chose her. The angel didn’t go to her because she was already full of grace; she became filled with grace because God had chosen her.

Mary certainly didn’t consider herself special in any way. We see this in her first reaction to the angel’s greeting. When the angel says, “Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you,” vs. 29 tells us that Mary was **greatly troubled and wondered what kind greeting this might be.**

Sometimes my old boss would walk into a gathering and single out someone and say, “ah, Dan! I’ve been hearing good things about you. Walk with me.” And the rest of us would think, poor Dan, he doesn’t know what he’s in for. His life is about to be turned upside down. Mary must have felt that way just from the angel’s greeting. Angels weren’t in the habit of just showing up for tea and a chat; Mary was sure that his appearance and this strange greeting meant that her life was about to change.

We don't know a lot about Mary but from the passage we know that she was a young woman from Nazareth, engaged to be married to a man who came from the line of David. Now, Nazareth was not a great town! It was a poor village with a population of about 400. If the town had any reputation, it doesn't seem to have been a good one! In John 1:46, when Philip tells his friend Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael responds with, "What good can come from Nazareth?" It was a little town, too far from Jerusalem and too removed from the center of action to be of much importance.

Besides the reality of where she lived, there was the bigger reality of who Mary was. She was young, female and poor which in her traditional Jewish culture put three strikes against her for any hope of greatness. So when she heard the angel's greeting she must have thought, "Do you know who you're talking to? You must have the wrong Mary because I haven't seen any favor in my life. You must be looking for a Mary from the next town over." Have you ever felt that way – unworthy and underserving about something that you were being asked to do or something you felt God leading you towards? Maybe a promotion at work, or a call to missions or ministry in the church, maybe a relationship? Sometimes we struggle with the idea that God loves us and wants to be part of our lives because we know ourselves too well. We think that God couldn't possibly want that for us. I believe that we all struggle with the same kind of insecurity and doubt that Mary must have felt at the angel's greeting.

And then, as if the idea of being highly favored wasn't incredulous enough, the angel goes on to give her a stunning piece of news: she is going to conceive and give birth to a baby who will be the son of the Most High God. Okay, the angel definitely has the wrong Mary! "How will this be?" she asks, "I am a virgin." In other words, what you are saying is impossible.

From Mary's interaction with the angel, I see her move through three different stages:

1. From Fear to Wonder

Fear has been a dominant feature of my Christian life. When I was a child, I was afraid of going to hell and afraid that I would never figure out how to go to heaven instead. When I finally heard the gospel and made a commitment to follow Christ, I was a teenager in a boarding school, away from home for the first time and eager to fit in. I had just started to settle into my new friendships when I felt God tugging at my heart and I was afraid that my new friends would ridicule me for my faith, so I kept my decision a secret for a few weeks. In college, I sensed that God was leading me to work full time in the church and my first response was fear. I was afraid of what my family would say (they were not pleased), afraid that I would be throwing away everything that I had been working on the last 4 years – I couldn't see how my math and chemistry degree would be useful in the church – and most of all, I was afraid that I would end up poor, constantly asking people for money. It didn't

help that the internship program that I wanted to join did not include a salary, and I would therefore need to raise funds to pay my way through it. And fear has been a huge obstacle for me this year. When we felt God leading us to move here, I was very excited about doing ministry in a new place, meeting new people, building new relationships but I was also afraid of what the move would really look like on the ground.

I found myself suddenly removed from most of the things that had come to mark my identity: my role at the church and the influence that came with it (and the paycheck, of course), my family and community of friends and the sense of getting ahead in life; working towards advancing my ministry role, taking on more responsibilities. Here, my world shrunk and I had to learn how to see myself in a new way. And I knew that God was calling me to simply rest in Him this year, to relinquish whatever control I thought I had over my life and let Him lead me. But every time I talked to my friends who were changing jobs, or starting a new business, or who had been chosen for a study fellowship, I feared that I was getting left behind and I would never catch up. So I tried to maneuver myself into work positions but every time I started the conversation with David I would sense the Holy Spirit saying, "No." It took most of this year for me to let go of that intense fear and to just enjoy the gifts that God has given me in this season. The Thankful Living series was very meaningful for me because it helped me to shift my focus away from all the things I thought had lost in the move and see all the blessings that we have received here. .

Fear is a typical response whenever we encounter something new or different. It certainly would be the expected response when an angel appears to you as you're going through your day. Almost every person that God called for a special assignment in Scripture responded at first with fear. We know that part of the distress Mary experience from the angel's greeting a feeling of fear. We see this from the angel's reassurance asking her not to be afraid because she has found favor with God (vs. 30). The Bible is full of the same assurance that the angel gave to Mary to "fear not." spoken to different people in different circumstances as they processed their encounters with God and His call over their life.

I used to think that the command to fear not meant that I shouldn't experience any fear at all. But I've come to see it as meaning that we shouldn't allow our fear to dictate our response to what God is asking. It's more like the angel saying, "I know you're afraid of what this means, but don't focus on the fear. Focus on the fact that God is with you and has chosen you." And we can see Mary moving from her initial distress into a place of wonder, and then, trust.

2. From Wonder to Trust

The angel's announcement that Mary will bear a son is even more confounding than his earlier greeting and Mary points this out in her response to the angel. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (vs.34). 6 months before this encounter, the same angel had been sent to Zechariah, who was married to Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. It is interesting to compare the difference between Mary and Zechariah's responses. In Luke 1:11 – 17, we see the angel appearing to Zechariah as he was serving in the sanctuary. Expectedly, Zechariah was afraid. But the angel gives him an assurance says, "Don't be afraid...for God has heard your prayer and your wife will bear you a son." These words are very similar to the ones spoken to Mary: don't be afraid, you have found favor with God.

Both Zechariah and Mary respond to Gabriel's announcement pretty much the same way: first with fear and then with a question. The difference was in the kind of question they asked and spirit behind the question. In vs. 18, Zechariah asks the angel, "How can I know this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

Mary's question in vs. 34 might sound similar, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Both questions acknowledge the impossibility of what the angel has said. The difference however, is that Mary is expressing **disbelief** while Zechariah is expressing **unbelief**. The seemingly subtle difference between, "How can I know?" and "How will this be?" has monumental impact on the outcome of each person's interaction with the angel. Zechariah is saying, what you're saying is impossible, so how can I know that it is true? Mary on the other hand is saying, "What you're saying sounds crazy and shocking and I know that it is possible, but how WILL it happen since I'm a virgin." Zechariah is asking for **proof**, Mary is asking for **clarification**. Mary's question came from a place of **faith**, Zechariah's came from a place of **doubt**. And because of his unbelief, God caused him to be mute for the duration of his wife's pregnancy.

Unfortunately, I tend to identify more with Zechariah than I do with Mary in this regard. Whenever I sense God calling me to something, I want some proof, a point by point explanation of how He is going to accomplish what he has said.

Some people say that we shouldn't question God but I believe that questions are an important part of our Christian journey. What we need to watch out for is the kind of questions we ask and what they reveal about the state of our heart and our understanding of Who God is. The right kind of questions, the kind that Mary asked, can cause us to grow and learn more about God and how he works. They can stretch and increase our faith, moving us from wonder at the seeming impossibility of what God might be asking us to, into a place of trusting that if He said it, then it will happen.

3. From Trust to Surrender

So far we've seen Mary move from fear (what does this mean?), to wonder, (How will this be?) and now we see her move to trust and surrender (let it be as you have said).

I mentioned earlier that I used to be intimidated by Mary because most of the sermons I heard preached about her focused on what appeared to be her very ready and quick submission to God's will. But no matter where I start off looking at Mary's story, I have to acknowledge that her final response to the angel's announcement is nothing short of remarkable. When I was a child, the image I had of Mary was of a grown woman, possibly in her 20s or 30s, a mature, grounded follower of God. At least that's what most of the pictures of her depicted. But when I consider that Mary was probably a teenager, maybe 13-17 years old because that is when girls were betrothed for marriage, then I am completely awed by her resolute trust and surrender. We don't know how long Mary pondered the news that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit. In the passage, her response of surrender comes right on the heels of the angel's explanation of how she will get pregnant. But I can imagine her pausing to reflect about how this would affect her life. If she said yes, she was practically inviting disaster upon herself. What if no one believed her? Once people found out that she was pregnant, they would assume that she had been unfaithful to Joseph. In fact, she risked being stoned to death for the sin of immorality. But even if she lived, there was a chance that Joseph would divorce her (which he actually considered doing before God sent Gabriel to confirm Mary's story.) Her family would probably disown her, and she would have to fend for herself and the baby. Could she really say yes to this and risk everything in her life? For the Messiah, absolutely!

Mary must have known the promises that God had made to her people, that he would one day send them the Messiah who would sit on David's throne and whose Kingdom would last forever. Her people were living under Roman rule at the time. In such circumstances, the poor often suffer greatly, much more than their wealthier brothers who can buy and bribe their way out of difficult situations. Mary and her people must have longed for this promised Messiah with all their hearts and now the angel was telling her that not only was the Messiah about to come, she had been chosen to bring him into the world. She had to decide if she was going to obey and make way for this King, or chose personal comfort and security and miss out on the greatest miracle.

I've struggled with the depictions of Mary's response as simple, blind obedience that don't leave room for question or reflection. To move too quickly to "Here I am, the Lord's servant," is to marginalize Mary as someone so superior to us that we could not possible relate with her. It also takes away her agency as a real woman with real emotions and fears.

While God expects complete obedience from us, he does not call us to blind allegiance. He did not create us to be pawns in his divine plan that he can move around at his own behest

without any regard to our own will. Obedience is something we must CHOOSE. We must listen to God and having considered all the possibilities, we must come to a place of decision: will I follow the Lord or choose myself? There will be times when obeying God's call and allowing him to use us will be easy, maybe you were already moving in the direction that he wants you to go, or what he's asking you fits into your current lifestyle or goals. But sometimes it might take great turmoil to come to a place of surrender. Even Jesus Christ himself experienced great anguish on his own journey towards submission to God's will. Whatever form your journey takes, you must come to the point of deciding whether you will follow God or choose self.

Whenever we encounter God's call to us whether through scripture, or a special prompting that God places on our hearts; no matter how or what he calls us to do, my prayer is that we can move past any fear we experience and like Mary, come to a place of complete trust and surrender; that we would recognize that God is the Master of our lives and we are his servants.

Reflection Questions

- 1. When have you felt unworthy or undeserving of God's calling or blessing?**
- 2. What would complete surrender to God look like for you as you celebrate the Lord's birth and move into the new year?**

Communion

As we come to the end of the service, we will celebrate communion together. Today I'd like us to reflect on what it means to find favor with God as Mary did and what difference that makes for our lives. Jesus was born because we had found favor with God, because God had poured out his grace upon us, giving us love and mercy that we did not deserve and calling us his own even before we knew him. That's what Christmas is about: finding and receiving favor from God. Like I said earlier, I know some people struggle with the idea that the great and mighty God that we worship could love them. The story of Christmas might sound too good to be true. You hear that God loves you and think, "Me? Does he know what I have done? Does he know who I am or where I come from?" And to these questions the Lord responds, "Do not be afraid. You have found favor with me and I am with you." Take a moment and think about what it means for you that you are favored by God... do you find yourself responding with joy and gratitude, or with skepticism because your life doesn't seem to reflect any favoredness? Do you respond like Mary with wonder and disbelief (man! I can't believe God loves me, this is amazing!) or with doubt and unbelief like Zechariah.