

Two years ago, I can remember being so excited to travel to Indiana and spend Christmas with our kids and grandkids, but we all came down with the flu and spent much of the time in bed. I think about what Christmas is like for the folks up in Paradise this year. Or I think of a family with a very sick child, knowing this is may be the last Christmas they'll have with him. In fact, sometimes Christmas doesn't take the pain away; sometimes it exacerbates it.

But this shouldn't surprise us, especially when you think about the realities of the first Christmas. Last week, we saw in Luke's gospel, how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and promised his wife would bear a child who'd prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah had a hard time believing Gabriel because he and his wife were too old to have children. He asked for a sign, and the angel gave him more than he bargained for — he was unable to speak until the promised was fulfilled.

At this point in Luke's gospel, Zechariah exits the stage, and there's a stark scene change. Luke leads us from the holy temple in Jerusalem to an obscure village. He leads us away from this holy priest to an unknown peasant; from an old man to a young woman. He leads us from Zechariah to Mary, an illiterate teenager.

More than anyone else in the Christmas story, Mary's story reveals some of the harsher realities of Christmas. Her Christmas was anything but picture perfect. As we'll see, she faced difficult circumstances and an uncertain future. But she also shows us how to find peace and even joy in the midst of it all.

It all started with what's traditionally called The Annunciation.

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. Luke 1:26-38

Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel

There are some striking similarities between what happened to Zechariah and Mary. Both of them were visited by the angel Gabriel. Both were given what seemed like an impossible promise of a child. One child would be filled with the Holy Spirit; the other would be conceived by the Holy Spirit. Both were given a sign: Zechariah was muted; Mary was told her elderly cousin Elizabeth was with child.

But the similarities end there. Mary was a young teenager from a podunk town called Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Nazareth was a "non-place." It is not even mentioned in the Old Testament. It was a rundown, halfway stop between the port cities of Tyre and Sidon. It was overrun by Gentiles and Roman soldiers. No wonder one of Jesus' disciples, Nathaniel, would later say, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

I can imagine the conversation in heaven between God and Gabriel. "Gabriel, now I want you to go down to Nazareth."

Gabriel turns his head and furrows his brow, "Nazareth! Where in the world's Nazareth?"

God says, "Well, it's down in Galilee."

Gabriel says, "Oh, Lord of Hosts, I understand why you sent me to Jerusalem, but Nazareth of Galilee? It's not even on the map!"

I think it's important to say here that our high and holy God loves to stoop and use the least likely people from the least likely places. In fact, later Mary sang the words, "For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (v. 48). I mean he could have gone to Jerusalem and picked out the High Priest's daughter, but he chose Mary. It's funny how many of our favorite Christmas stories follow the same pattern. My favorite is Rudolph. The poor little misfit can't even join the reindeer games, let alone hope to earn a place on Santa's team. But an unexpected storm turns his disability into an asset, and he becomes the hero.

The one bright spot in Mary's life is she was "pledged to be married" or betrothed to a young carpenter named Joseph. This meant more than an engagement does today. It was a binding contract; any breach of it was considered adultery; to get out of it, you actually had to initiate divorce proceedings. Betrothed couples had many of the same responsibilities of marriage but without the privileges. Luke also told us Joseph was a descendant of King David.

We don't know what Mary was doing. Perhaps she was in the midst of her morning chores, daydreaming about her future with Joseph. What kind of husband would he be? How would they decorate the house? When would their first child come along? Then the unthinkable happened. The angel Gabriel, sent by God himself, appeared to her. And you can see, based on their conversation, this going to be anything but picture perfect.

Mary responded with fear, confusion, and a sense of loss.

It began with a rather strange greeting. Gabriel called her "highly favored" and said, "the Lord is with you." Mary's response wasn't, "Well, it's nice to meet you, Gabriel. And thanks for the compliment!" No, she was "greatly troubled at his words." She wondered why in the world he called her, of all people, "highly favored." And it scared her. Why else would the angel say, "Don't be afraid, Mary...?"

Gabriel sensed her fear and confusion, and explained more: she would conceive and give birth to a child, the long-awaited Messiah-King. Like every Jewish kid, she grew up hearing all about the coming Son of David. It might have even crossed her mind that Joseph was from the line of David. "But me, the mother of the Messiah?" And then it hit her, "Wait a minute, that's not how my mother told me it worked. How can I have a child? I've never been with a man?" She did not doubt as Zechariah did, she was just confused as to how this would take place.

And then came the shocker: "Who did he say the father would be? The Holy Spirit will overshadow me and make me pregnant?" Imagine the swirl of emotions. One the one hand, she was stunned by the honor. On the other hand, she dreaded how this could play out. What would people think? Jewish law said a man or woman who committed adultery was to be stoned. Thank God the Romans didn't allow that any longer, she must have thought. And how would Joseph react? Could he possibly believe her story? "Hey Gabriel, could you pay him a visit too?" Otherwise, she would certainly lose him; he had every right to divorce her. She'd be disgraced. Talk about an uncertain future. All her dreams are dying. Along with fear and confusion, she was experiencing a deep sense of loss.

So, once again, this is a far cry from a picture-perfect Christmas. Two weeks ago today, we got the news that our son and son-in-law were fired from their respective positions as football coaches

at WKU. It came as a tremendous shock after winning their last two games. Honestly, for a lot of reasons I won't go into, it felt unfair. They've worked incredibly hard and recruited well for the future. But things were said in the press that just were not true. We know they're going to be fine, but in some ways, they have an uncertain future. Lynn and I were talking the other day about what we'd write in our Christmas letter. I mean don't we all love to brag about how successful our kids are in our Christmas letters, and in all the important ways we're very proud of them, but it's not a picture-perfect Christmas for them or for us.

But the question I want to ask is how do we find peace in the midst of this? How did Mary find peace in the midst of the fear, confusion, and sense of loss she was feeling? Many scholars believe Luke was using Mary as an example of what true discipleship looked like; of what it would really meant for all subsequent believers to follow Jesus. There are two things I'd like to point out about Mary that are crucial for our own discipleship; crucial for us to find peace in the midst of an uncertain future.

Mary is an example of surrender to God's plan

First, Mary is an example of surrender to God's plan. Again, she was dealing with a massive intrusion into her life. Mary had a plan for her life, and God messed it up in a big way. She was being asked to say yes to a lot of pain. Later, when Mary and Joseph dedicated Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon declared to Mary that because of this child "a sword will pierce your own soul." And right here the first cut was made.

But somehow in that battlefield of her own heart, she chose to surrender: "I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled." In simple faith, Mary said, "Yes" to God. She said yes to God's intrusion because she saw herself as a servant, literally a bond-slave of the Lord. A bond-slave is one who's given up his or her right to call the shots. She realized she doesn't own herself. She was not autonomous. She belonged to someone else.

Think of how different your life would be if you saw yourself as a bond-slave of the Lord. What would you stop wrestling with God over? What would you stop doing to secure your own place? Maybe you've been mistreated by someone — a friend, a co-worker, or a family member. You've been cheated, and you're angry about it. You're not getting a fair shake. What do you do? How do you handle it? Do you try to secure your own position; demand your own rights? Do you hold a grudge? Surrendering might mean a willingness to forgive.

Corrie Ten Boon told of when she was speaking in a church and recognized a man in a gray overcoat. He was a guard in the concentration camp she and her sister were in during WW II. Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, and the shame of walking naked past the man.

Now this former guard was in front of her with his hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" It was the first time since her release that she'd been face to face with one of her captors. She froze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he said. "I was a guard there. But since that time, I've become a Christian. I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I'd like to hear it from your lips as well." Again, the hand came out — "Will you forgive me?"

She stood there, and couldn't do it. Her sister died there. Hours seemed to pass as the man stood there with his hand held out, and Corrie wrestled with the most difficult thing she ever had to do. She knew she didn't really have a choice. Jesus commanded it.

So, she prayed, "Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so mechanically she thrust her hand into his. As she did, she said a current started in her shoulder, raced down her arm, and sprang into their joined hands. And then a healing warmth seemed to flood her whole being, bringing tears to her eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment they held each other's hands, the former guard and former prisoner. Corrie made the same choice Mary did. "I am the Lord's servant. I don't get to hold onto my anger!"

I'm not suggesting we won't wrestle over this. Self never gives up easy. There will be a battle within, and it'll be daily. Jesus called us to take up our cross daily. It's the daily part that's so hard. Every day we have to make that choice. But as with Mary, there's blessing on the other side of surrender.

Or maybe God has given you something hard to live with; something you can't change; something that will never change. Everett Koop, our former surgeon general, tells of a family whose severely handicapped child he had delivered and helped to keep alive after birth. He asked the child's mother, "What's the worst thing that ever happened to you?" She said, "Having our son Paul born with defects that required 37 operations to correct."

Then he asked, "What's the best thing that ever happened to you?" She said, "Having our son Paul born with defects that required 37 operations to correct." Koop explained: "I know what she means. It's been terribly hard on them, but, through the experience, they've grown enormously as a family. They've had a remarkable spiritual reawakening. One of their sons is now in law school planning to defend the rights of the handicapped. Paul has now had 55 operations, with one more scheduled. Despite the hardships, it's been an overwhelmingly positive experience for them."

Could it be that as with Mary our greatest gifts come disguised as intrusions demanding our surrender? Philip Yancey wrote,

"Every work of God comes with two edges--great joy and great pain."

To find genuine peace may very well mean we accept from his hand, as a servant does a task from his master, something that at first may seem unthinkable. The worst thing we could imagine may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to us.

Maybe you're facing difficulty in your marriage, your career, or your health. Can you see it as the opportunity to surrender to God? That's the hope held out to us in the example of Mary. Because she knew her future, her body, and her reputation were not her own but her Master's, she was free to let go and let God have his way in her life.

Mary is an example of receptivity to God's grace in Jesus

Second, Mary is an example of receptivity to God's grace in Jesus. Twice the angel used the word favor to describe Mary. When he greeted her, he called her "favored one." A bit later, he said, "You have received favor from God."

Why was she favored? This tells us more about God than about Mary. The word here for favor is the same word for grace. It suggests the giving of an undeserved gift. Mary was a stellar young woman, but make no mistake, God's blessing to her sprung solely from his grace; she didn't earn it. She was favored because she was the recipient of God's unmerited, freely bestowed grace.

And that grace would come to Mary the same way it comes to all of us — through Jesus. If we read this story and all we do is extol the virtues of Mary, we miss the main point. The main point is Jesus. What do we learn here about Jesus?

First, we learn he was born of a virgin. The Virgin Birth is a critical piece of God's plan for salvation. That's why it's included in most of the ancient creeds. Wasn't it wonderful to see all of our ex-Presidents reciting the Apostle's Creed at George Bush's funeral? Together they said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, born of the Virgin Mary." Why is that important? Why is it important Jesus was without a biological father? Because our salvation depends on it.

You see, it's absolutely critical for our salvation that Jesus was without sin. Sin is an inherited disease. The apostle Paul, who called himself the chief of sinners, tells us in his letter to the Romans that sin entered the world through one man. The viral infection of sin started with Adam and has infected all of us. So, something had to break that chain of inherited sin. It's only when God bypassed the sin of Adam through the Virgin Birth that He provided a Savior unstained by this disease. So, when Jesus died on the cross, he was an acceptable sacrifice to God, without sin. The Virgin Birth is crucial because we all need a Savior. And guess what? Mary needed a Savior, too! And she was receptive to that. Now we can join her in being "highly favored"

because we've received the same grace she did. Before you can experience the peace of God, you must have peace with God. You can't have a picture-perfect Christmas without knowing Jesus as your Savior, having peace with God; and you can't have peace with God without the Virgin Birth.

But we also learn something else about Jesus here: He was born a King. That's what the angel said — he'll be given the throne of David; his kingdom will never end. Israel always longed for a righteous king. One who'd overthrow their oppressors and rule with justice. At times, Israel had kings like that, but mostly they had kings who were oppressive and weak. And because of that, Israel was sent into exile; they lived as a people in captivity. The longing of their hearts in captivity was for a great king to free and restore them to living in the way of God. Even here as the angel appeared to Mary, Israel was occupied by Rome, and they longed for a king to come and deliver them.

But the truth is Jesus came to free us from a greater captivity than just a political one. He came to deliver us from the power of sin and to establish an everlasting Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." He's done that through the cross and resurrection, and that work will culminate with his return to set up a new heaven and a new earth. Throughout her life, Mary had to learn he was her King, too. Today, he's our King. We invite Him to reign in our hearts, our church, and in every good endeavor we engage in.

Just one more thing about Jesus that Mary's story teaches us: Mary carried the life of God within her. She was highly favored because she was receptive to carrying the Son of God in her womb. You may say, "That's great for Mary. But what does it have to do me?" Well, what does it really mean to be a Christian? Some people might say, "A Christian is a person who believes in Jesus." Someone else might say, "A Christian is someone who follows the teaching and example of Jesus." Both these statements are true. But neither of them tells the whole story. To be a Christian means the life of Jesus is in you. The apostle Paul said, "I've been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). And when he wrote to Christians in the town of Galatia, he said, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..." (Gal. 4:19). On another occasion, he spoke of, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). The Christ who was physically formed in Mary is formed in his people by the Spirit. A Christian is a person with the life of Jesus in them. If you're a Christian, like Mary, you're highly favored because you carry this marvelous privilege — the life of God is in you.

So, let me ask you a few questions:

- What might it look like for you to surrender to God's plan as a bond-slave?
- Where is God calling you to say yes to his plan?
- What might it look like this Christmas season to say, "I'm the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."
- How receptive are you to the grace of God in Jesus?
- Do you know you're highly favored by God because of him?
- Do you know he's come to overthrow that which oppresses us and establish his reign in and through us?
- Is Christ being formed in you? Do you understand that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me?

How do we experience a picture-perfect Christmas with an uncertain future? We receive God's grace in Jesus, and we surrender to God's plan.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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