

Christmas 2011

From Worry to Worship

Luke 1:26-56

Key Verse: 1: 32-33

“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,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Today we gather to thank God for his grace and mercy upon us and to prepare our hearts for Christmas where we will worship the birth of Christ. Today’s passage is about Mary and her experience as she finds out for the very first time that she is going to be the mother of the Messiah.

And as we meditate on her story keep in mind that there are two ways to approach life. One way is to be centered around us and we try to fit God into our life. Where we try to understand God in the context our life and experiences. The result of this approach is that when things are good, you feel like God is a good god and that he loves and cares for you. That’s good, but what about when things get tough? You’ll start to wonder, “Is God real, does he exist?” And if he does exist, does he care about me? And if he does care about me why does he let me suffer? And ultimately what happens when you take this approach, is when you need God the most, you will run **from** him not **to** him. You’ll have **questions about him** and not **worship him**. And you’ll end up in a difficult place where your future feels uncertain and you’re wondering, “OMG what’s going to happen next. How is my life going to work out?” Maybe this is because of sin you’ve committed or that has been committed against you, or maybe it’s just the situation you happen to be in.

The other way to approach life is to be centered around God and we seek to find how do we fit into God’s plan. Where we try to under our life and experiences in the context of God. The result of this approach is when things are good, again you feel like God is a good god and that he loves and cares for you. But it differs when things get tough for us. As we go to Scripture, we realize that God is good and he has a plan that he is unfolding through history to be a redeemer, deliverer and Savior. And ultimately what happens when you take this approach is when you are struggling with: hardship, sin, anxiety, or frustration, you run **to** God not **from** him, you **trust in God** not **question him** and you see your life in the context of God, not the other way around. And what you find is that this helps us to have peace even in the midst of storms.

When you read the Bible you’ll find that God gives us people that serve as examples. Some of those example are bad and serve as warnings for us but others are good and help us to respond to our situation with faith in God, trusting in him and his goodness. One of the best examples that God gives is a woman named Mary. She is amazing and her story actually starts way, way, back in Genesis, after the fall of man, when God promised that her child would crush the head of Satan. (Gen 3:15) And we learn more about her when the prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years before Mary was even born, revealed through the Holy Spirit that a young, unmarried virgin woman would give birth to a male child, a son. And that his name would be Immanuel, which means God with us. (Isa 7:14) This is God’s rescue mission where he would enter into human history, that the Creator would enter creation, when God would become man. And as a man he would understand us and ultimately become our mediator, our reconciler and our Savior which we need to bring us back to our Creator. And so hundreds of years passed by and everyone was wondering, where is this man and who is this virgin woman?

One day the angel Gabriel shows up to a young woman named Mary to give her the good news. The story begins in verses 26-27. “In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,²⁷

to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary." Out of all the places in the world Gabriel could go, Nazareth might have been at the bottom of the list. Nazareth was nothing. In fact even Jesus' disciple Nathanael once said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46) That's a rhetorical question where the assumption is no. It was a dump, rural, small town where everyone's life goal was to get out. However that's exactly the place that God chose to change human history.

Mary and Joseph are probably teenagers at this point and they are engaged and planning their upcoming wedding. Gabriel says to Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.³² 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,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (v28-33) When Gabriel said that she "found favor with God," this meant that God was going to pour his grace, his love, his blessing all over her. God could have looked down upon the earth and said, "I'll pick a wealthy, successful, significant woman," or "I'll pick a beautiful town by the ocean, with a palace so that the my Son could grow up in wealth, prominence and significance and have the best education, travel and see the world," but instead God said, "Mary, I choose you." Christianity is all about God favoring you by grace, choosing a nobody from nowhere and giving them love, simply because God is good. That's why we can't stop singing of how wonderful God is. And he tells her, "you're going to give birth to a son, you need to name him Jesus," which means God saves me from my sins. And amazingly her son, the one she will give birth to, he will become her Savior.

Mary's response is very important. She says, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (v34) Mary isn't showing unbelief, she believes what Gabriel says, it's just that she's wondering how. It's a fair question. So Gabriel explains it, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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."³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God." (v35-37) Our God is the god of the impossible. God can create something out of nothing. He can take an old woman like Elizabeth who was beyond child bearing age and make her pregnant. He can take a virgin like Mary and give her a son. He can take on human form and enter the world. He can be killed and rise from the dead. He can forgive our sins and answer our prayers. He can save us from death and give us eternal life. Impossibilities are no problem for our God. This is why we're happy and hopeful, this is why we sing and pray because our God is a God of the impossible. For nothing is impossible with God. And Mary's response is legendary. She says, "I am the Lord's servant, May it be to me as you have said." (v38) Mary is a simple woman from a simple town with sincere and simple faith. It's amazing, it's a miracle, she simply believes what Gabriel is telling her. Martin Luther said, "Perhaps the greatest miracle is faith." Maybe he's right.

We probably don't fully understand the magnitude of what just happened. She's planning her wedding and she's got her whole life sketched out in her mind. She's going to get married, start a family, have kids and live happily ever after. But God intervenes and decides to completely change her life and it's going to get way more complicated. Suddenly she is thrust into a situation where she will lose her reputation and may lose her fiancé, her wedding and maybe even her life according to the law. Not only that, pregnancy alone can be stressful and difficult, women and children have died at childbirth. Now throw in the fact that she was at such a young age, and a single mother, and not to mention that this is God's son she better do a good job. That's a lot of pressure, for a teenager. Mary is willing to give up her dreams, security and trust her future to God and that's amazing. It shows that she does not idolize marriage, or her reputation,

comfort or security. She's willing to open her hands and let it all be taken from her so that she can lovingly serve Jesus. That's faith. That's trust. That's a miracle. That's amazing.

Mary was in a circumstance where she had plenty of opportunity to be worried. She has a lot to worry about. For those of you who worry well, maybe that's your spiritual gift, you're good at worrying. Maybe you're at a point in your life where there's a lot you're worried about - like finals for example. Maybe you're thinking, "How am I going to be able to get through all my finals, or finish those projects?" There is a lot to worry about. What about your upcoming High school entrance exam, that's pretty important for your future. Or the ACT or SAT those are important for what college you get into. What about your marriage? What if you marry the wrong person and end up with a jerk? What about your job? This is an unstable economy, what if you can't find a job and you end up on the street? What about your future life's direction, what if you've picked the wrong profession and you hate your job? What about your kids? What if they get hurt, or maybe become a threat to society and end up on the news or worse they reject Jesus? What if you're life is a complete failure? There's a lot of worry out there, it's endless, but somebody's got to carry it, right? There's a lot to be concerned about. Can any of you identify with Mary and understand where she's at?

After Mary received the angel's message, she heads out to the hill country of Judea. She makes this dangerous, roughly 100 mile journey alone in the middle eastern heat to see her relative Elizabeth and check if what the angel said was true. It's important that we follow a **decision** of faith with **an act** of faith. And the moment Mary greets Elizabeth everything is confirmed. This old grandma with a baby bump was **the sign** that God gave for her. And Mary is inspired as Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and shouts, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (v43-45) As Mary has been away from home she doesn't know exactly what would await her when she returned. Even though the angel's message was confirmed, still her situation hadn't changed. Would Joseph really want to marry her? After all, she said she was a virgin, but would he believe that? Would she have to go this alone as a single mother? Would her family accept her? What about her reputation? She told everyone, "I love God, it's a miracle, God made me pregnant." And they would say, "yeah right."

She still has things to worry about. So many people encourage others in difficult situations, "Don't worry, it'll be alright." People wonder, "Well, if I shouldn't worry, what should I do?" Worship. Take all of that energy and put it toward worship. Mary does. Instead of worrying, she begins to worship. And Mary said, or sang; ultimately this is going to be a song. "My soul glorifies the Lord"⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name." (v46-49) Instead of thinking about all the problems in her life and worrying about them one after another, Mary thinks about God and how great he is and all that he has done. And she goes from worry to worship.

What is worship? Worship is when we give ourselves to someone or something all the time. Worship is what we were made to do. And in fact it's actually what we do all the time, we just don't realize that we're doing it. We were created to be worshipers of God and we're supposed to celebrate God and love, serve and enjoy him because God is good. But what happens is someone or something takes the place of God. The perversion of worship is idolatry. We never stop worshipping, it just becomes a matter of what do we worship. God gave us the Ten Commandments to help us understand this. The first two commandments are: there's one true God, worship him alone. It's amazing, if you obey those two commandments, you don't break the rest. You don't worship food and become a glutton. You don't

worship sex and become perverted. You don't worship money and become a thief. Those two commandments changes how you live. But people get it wrong and put rock stars, athletes, hobbies, girlfriends, husbands, kids, intellect, reputation, appearance, or a job in place of God. We live for them, we get our meaning, our value, our security, our significance, from them and we worship them. And the worship is always in vain because idols always disappoint. Unlike God, they're not perfect or selfless, they're not loving or good, and they won't endure forever. That's why idolaters always despair.

We were created in the image of God and we should reflect that image back toward others. That's what Mary meant when she sang, "my soul glorifies the Lord." Other translations say, "my soul magnifies the Lord." Without realizing it, we become more and more like what we worship. I remember when Michael Jackson and Madonna were big, so many people would dress like them. They look silly now but back in the 80's that was popular. "Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary's deepest desire was God. Her spirit rejoiced in God. St Paul had the same kind of desire when he said, "I want to know Christ." Those who find this truth, are the ones who can rejoice in any circumstance because they find true joy.

And why does Mary worship the Lord? Because he is worthy. And Mary goes on to sing in detail about why Jesus is worthy to be worshiped. What's interesting to note is that she is from the middle of nowhere and most likely illiterate and yet her song is full of scripture. She says 14 things about God. In fact in her first sentence she declares God as the Lord. This means the he is about all other kings and his kingdom is above all other kingdoms. This included Caesar who presently ruled over her own country. To her, God was King of kings and Lord of lords. Secondly, Mary said that God was her Savior. Even at a young age Mary understood the need for a savior. When we disobey God, we sin. And this disobedience has consequences. When we break the law, for example speeding, this disobedience has consequences. We have to go to court and pay the fine or go to traffic school, or even lose the privilege of driving. Sin has consequences. And those consequences are death. All of us have broken these rules and are deserving of this penalty. We need a Savior like this. Mary rejoiced when she could see the one who would come to her rescue and save her.

Mary continued, "for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name." In this phrase Mary shows that God is mindful, he's mighty and holy. And what is striking is just how personal God is. He's alive. He's living. He thinks, he feels, he speaks, he loves, he knows. The Bible says that God knows every hair on your head. He knows every longing of your heart and every day of your life. God knows it all. And do you know what, he pays attention. No one paid attention to Mary. But God did, he was mindful of her situation and although people would call her names and look down on her calling her a tramp and harlot, stripping her of her dignity, God would restore her dignity and bless her down through the generations.

Mary continues, "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." From these verses we find that God is merciful, faithful and that he knows our inner most thoughts. He is gracious and lifts up the humble and generous by giving good things to those in need. God is sovereign and he rules over history bringing down rulers who become proud and oppress others. And lastly Mary proclaims that God is eternal. Kingdoms rise and fall, rulers come and go but our God and goodness goes on forever. Our God is worthy to be worshipped.

What are you distressed about right now? You're probably worried about it. But have you worshiped about it? But you may ask, "what if I don't feel like worshipping." This is true we won't feel like worshipping if we only think about our problems. Mary taught us the secret of worship. It's not about how we feel, but about what God has done. To worship, we focus on God and his greatness, kindness and faithfulness to us personally. When we remember his personal love we automatically worship him. Mary thinks about God her Savior not her problems. Sometimes when we worship, we sing because we feel it, but other times we sing **until** we feel it. Mary worships because she realizes who God is and what he has done for her. Do you remember all that God has done for you? Do you remember who God is? Gabriel told Mary, "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,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." It's not about how we feel but it is about who God is and what he has done. Remember if we center on ourselves, we will end up worrying. But if we center on God we will end up worshipping.

And sometimes when we worship we are so lifeless and stone faced. It hardly looks like we are worshipping at all. Do you remember how King David worshipped? David danced and sang with all his heart before the Lord. He didn't care who was watching or what other people think. He didn't matter if he was in his underwear he shamelessly worshiped the Lord his God, because he loved God and experienced his personal love.

Christmas is about remembering what God has done for us. It's when God sent his one and only son as a baby in a manger who would pay the price for our sin on the cross so that we may have life in his name. Christmas is about worshipping the baby Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Like the Magi who came bearing gifts, like Mary who sang songs of praise. Will you join us in worship, or will you let your worries rule your life?