



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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In the latest issue of the Way I make mention of a new movie that is coming out in the next week. This movie is simply entitled "The Nativity Story." It is a movie depicting the birth of Jesus Christ. Now I know that some of you went to see the Passion of the Christ, the movie portraying the death of Jesus. A lot of you for your own reasons decided not to go and watch it and that fine. This latest movie has nothing to do with the same producers and directors etc from the passion. But in the Nativity you will see the bible story of the birth of Christ as recorded in the Bible. However there are parts in the movie that are not in the bible because if they had done this the movie would only have lasted half an hour so what they have done is they have built into the film, local traditions that existed at that time, to try to create a broader picture. One of the things that will probably strike you is the age of Mary and so I thought it might be a good idea on this the first Sunday in Advent to look at the person of Mary just to see what we can learn.

There's a part of us that wants to believe that the stories in the Bible happened to people who were very different from us.

If you've seen as many Christmas cards and sung as many Christmas carols and watched as many Christmas shows as the average person, it's easy to have a distorted picture of what actually did take place two thousand years ago. We think that Jesus was born on a serene, peaceful night in perfect conditions, and that Mary had a halo around her head, and the baby awoke but no crying he made. But in believing this we start to lose the impact of the real Christmas story.

Here's the message of the Bible: that when God decided to send his one and only Son to earth, God chose very real people in a very real place to be participants in the drama. But the wonderful thing about the Christmas story is that it included people that we can relate to. The Christmas story happened to people who were just like you and just like me. In Luke 1, we're introduced to one of the main Christmas characters. This is Mary, and we all know her as the mother of Jesus.

Luke 1:26-27 says:

"In the sixth month, (that's 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".

I want to take a moment and look at these verses to see what we can learn about Mary, and what this has to teach us for today.

Out of the entire Bible, these two verses give us the most information about what we know of Mary, so let's take a look to see if we can understand exactly who Mary was. The Bible says:

"God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin... The virgin's name was Mary".

The first fact that we learn about Mary is that Mary was from Nazareth. We don't know a lot about Nazareth, but we do know that it was a town of a relatively small size in a relatively out-of-the-way place. Nazareth was not exactly a happening place at that time. In fact, one person, Nathaniel, said of Nazareth in John 1:46:

"Nazareth...Can anything good come from there?"

It would be as impressive as saying that you're from Moneydig or from Ballyrashane. That's the first fact about Mary that we learn:

MARY WAS FROM AN OUT- OF-THE-WAY PLACE.

Luke 1:27 continues:

"She was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David."

That's the second fact that we learn about Mary:

MARY WAS UNMARRIED BUT ENGAGED OR PLEDGED OR BETROTHED.

You need to understand that the marriage system was very different back then. Mary was in the worst of both worlds. She had lost all the benefits of singleness without gaining any of the benefits of married life.

Mary had entered an agreement to be married to Joseph – an agreement that was legally binding. There were only two ways to get out of a betrothal: death and divorce. If the betrothal ended because of death, then the girl would be considered a widow, even though she had not yet been married. So, Mary was in this state of being legally bound to be married to someone, and yet not yet married.

The fact that Mary was engaged points us to a third fact that we can conclude about Mary:

MARY WAS PROBABLY VERY YOUNG - MAYBE IN HER EARLY TEENS.

In those days, the engagement or betrothal would take place very soon after puberty. It's possible that Mary was only 12 or 13 years old. Mary was an incredibly young person by today's standards to be getting married and to be having children.

To put these facts together, Mary was an early teenage girl from an out-of-the-way place who was likely poor and uneducated.

Surely you ask, "Why out of all the women in the world, did God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus?" Why? I believe that God's trying to teach us a lesson. You and I have a hard time believing that God can use something ordinary. In fact, if we were to be truthful, a lot of us would have a hard time believing that God could use us. But you'd be wrong if you believe that. Because if nothing else, the story of Mary teaches us one thing: that...

GOD USES ORDINARY PEOPLE...

You may feel completely ordinary, completely average. You may feel like you've got average finances, average looks, an average house, and average-size trousers. But Mary

teaches us that God loves to use ordinary people. God loves to use people just like you and just like me. Over the years, people have developed a lot of strange theories about Mary. In fact, there's a whole phenomenon called Mariology that refers to the theories that people have developed. Some believe that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life. Others started to call Mary the Mother of God - a statement that never appears in the Bible. Others took a story in the Bible, in which people approached Mary at a wedding to speak to her son, as an argument that we can pray to Mary to try to get her Son to do us favours. They've almost made her a special intercessor. It's the reasoning that if **you** can't get Jesus to do something, maybe his mother can. Some have even gone so far as to venerate Mary. Some have even asserted that Mary was born completely sinless and lived a sinless life. I don't want to guess as to why all these theories developed, but I wonder if part of the reason is because we have a hard time believing that God can use an ordinary person. We have a hard time believing that God can use a person just like you, and just like me. Part of me wants to believe that when God acts, God uses people like that. It seems hard to believe that God could use ordinary people from ordinary places with ordinary abilities. But that's exactly the kind of person that God loves to use.

1 Corinthians 1:28-29 says:

"God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God."

God loves to use ordinary people. Because in one sense, Mary was completely ordinary. There was nothing extraordinary about her. But the question becomes, "Why did God choose her? Why, out of all the women in the world, did God choose Mary? The reason is that there's a particular type of ordinary person that God loves to use. Mary teaches us this: God does amazing things through people who are completely surrendered to him.

Three attitudes that Mary possessed, that are common to people who are completely surrendered to God:

1. MARY HUMBLER HERSELF BEFORE GOD.

An elderly man who was severely injured lost 3/4 of his blood volume. While he stayed in the hospital to recuperate, nurses came to check him. They discovered him out of bed and on the floor on his hands and knees. Concerned, they queried him.

The man replied that he had accidentally spilled water and didn't want the nurse on duty to get in trouble for the hazardous condition in the room. His reaction was clearly instinctual. It revealed a kind and selfless disposition. The antic was also a truly humble one. The man on the floor was President Ronald Reagan following the attempted assassination on his life.

Even though in poor health and elderly, this most powerful man felt no self-importance. He made a spill so he swabbed the floor.

Do you think that there might have been some temptation to get proud as the mother of Jesus? Mary never did this.

Mary never let her pride get in the way of being used by God. She didn't have false pride - she didn't act all "gee, shucks" and deny that she was being used in a unique way. But she refused to take the glory. She gave all the glory to God.

Mary said:

"Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Saviour! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed" (Luke 1:46-48).

Mary gave all the praise to God. One of the greatest indications of Mary's humility is how few times she's mentioned in the Gospels.

Jesus' best friend, John, adopted her after Jesus died. John was also the writer of one of the Gospels. John's Gospel mentions Mary only twice. Both times that John mentions Mary, it's in the context of Mary taking a backseat to her son Jesus Christ.

If Mary was proud, she probably would have muscled her way into that Gospel. But Mary was humble. She served her role as Jesus' mother and moved out of the way. In fact, the last time you see Mary in the Bible, she's simply with other believers praying (Acts 1:14). Mary humbled herself before God.

James 4:6 says:

"God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favour to the humble."

If you're going to be used by God, if you're going to be surrendered, you're also going to be humble. You're going to have to let God get the glory. You're going to have to surrender your pride to him.

2. MARY BELIEVED GOD'S PROMISES.

It takes courage to be used by God. God uses people who trust his promises. The angel told Mary:

"Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

Mary surrendered to God because she trusted God to keep his promises. She believed that he would do what he had said.

A little after Mary received the news from the angel, Mary penned a song that's recorded in Luke 1:46-55. Many people call this song the Magnificat. This song is remarkable for a number of things, but one of its features is that it's full of Scripture.

Mary was a person who had spent time getting to know God through his Word. Mary knew God's promises. Mary was a person who had spent time in the Word of God, and her mind had been steeped in his promises. One of the most practical steps that we can take is to get to know the Word of God - to find a version that we can understand, and to begin reading it to learn more about God and what he says to us. If you need help on where you should start and how you can understand what you read, I'd love to help you. Mary believed God's promises. This is important if you're going to be surrendered to God.

3. MARY ALSO RECEIVED GOD'S GRACE.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he said these words:

"Greetings, favoured woman! The Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28)

Mary was highly favoured because she was the recipient of God's grace. Ultimately, there was nothing that Mary did to deserve to be used by God. She was used because of God's grace.

It was a gift to her. Whenever God uses somebody, it's not because they deserve to be used. It's ultimately because God chooses to favour us by letting us be used by him. I'm so glad that Mary was an ordinary person. I'm glad that God loves to use ordinary people like me, like you. We don't have to be extraordinarily gifted or extraordinarily placed. We can be used by God, just as we are. All we have to do is to surrender to him, to say as Mary did, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true."

Two questions for you: Have you taken the step of coming to Jesus and becoming an ordinary person who's been extraordinarily forgiven? There's no catch. You don't have to do anything. You just have to receive what's being offered to you freely.

You just need to receive the gift of eternal life by responding in faith, by beginning to follow him. That can happen today.

That's question one: have you taken that step? But here's question two. In the busyness of life, in the middle of doubts that you could ever be used by God in your circumstances, with your abilities, with your limitations - have you ever taken the step of saying what Mary did? Would you be willing to offer yourself to be used by God today - obviously in a different way - but to be used as he sees fit? Would you be willing to say what Mary did - "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants."

Are you at the point of absolute surrender to God?

At the start of our service we announced that the crèche needs helpers. Helpers who will turn up when needed.

Helpers who don't necessarily need to know one end of a baby from another, but helpers who are prepared to humble themselves to look after a child that is not theirs in much the same way as Mary did...

John Ortberg in "The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People."

Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, in effect, "Here is your ministry. Give yourself to those who can bring you no status or clout. Just help people. You need this little child. You need to help this little child, not just for her sake, but more for your sake.

For if you don't, your whole life will be thrown away on an idiotic contest to see who is the greatest.

But if you serve here often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight, then the day may come when you do it without thinking, "What a wonderful thing I've done."

Then you will begin serving naturally, effortlessly, for the joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works.