

Mary

The Mothers of Jesus, Pt.4

Well, it is Christmas and I love Christmas. Love everything about Christmas – I even love when the stores are all crowded, is that weird? I don't know, there's just a sense of energy and anticipation.

Christmas reminds of many of the things I love about being a Christian, actually. Come to think of it, it also reminds me of a few things about Christians I *don't* like so much. Like how we seem to feel that in order to be really “spiritual” we have to be a stick in the mud – or to have a stick stuck someplace *besides* the mud!

I got a ministers newsmagazine and it had an opening article about Christmas. And before I could even read the article, this was the call-out blurb written in bold with an exclamation point at the end: “Christmas was never meant to be about a tree in the living room, but a tree on Calvary. It was never meant to be a holiday from work, but the working out of the strategic plan of God's loving act of salvation for us!”

Ok, I mean that's true. But is it really *necessary*? Is it going to attract anyone to the faith? Why must we...? I mean, hey, you know what, I love the tree in my living room. *Love* it! I will sit there at night and just look at it and say, “Thank you Jesus for dying on

Calvary so I can have this tree in my living room.” Is that tree the “reason for the season”? No, of course not, but it's beautiful and it brings me joy and it – along with everything else – makes me reflective on Christ at Christmas. I love it.

Must we diminish the mundane and common things to elevate the spectacular things? I think Christmas – as much as anything – says, “No, that's not what the gospel is all about.” I mean think about it, you've got shepherds – doesn't get much more mundane than that – and *they* get the angels with the light show and the music! I think that's what the gospel is always trying to get through to us – the great big God delights in connecting with the little things and if you look at the little things in the right way, you can always see the great big God in them. It's not the sacred versus the secular, it's *all* sacred, because God is at work in and through and with everything – including that tree in my living room.

That's actually been a major theme running through our Christmas series this year if you noticed. For the last four weeks we've been examining the “mothers of Jesus”; the women that you find listed in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew Chapter 1 – women like Tamar and Ruth and Bathsheba. You talk about finding God in surprising places – these are your stories.

We've said that Matthew doesn't start the Jesus story the way you start a legend, "Once upon a time." But he starts with a boring old genealogy because historical facts can sometimes be boring. These are real stories. And we've been looking at these women's lives and noticing their stories, their actions, their character, which reveal to us so much about their son Jesus who was born in the city of David at Christmas and sheds light on why he came and who he was.

And Matthew ends his genealogy this way – here's the culmination that started with Abraham and crescendoes at...? **Matthew 1:16**, "...and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and **Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.**" Ah yes, today we get to the *literal* mother of Jesus, Mary. But don't think she's any less surprising than the rest of them. She's all "Hail Mary, Mother of God" *now*, but let's not forget the scandalous nature of her Christmas story.

How does God come into the world – official government decree?...a top-notch PR campaign?...go viral on social media? No, how about the womb of a poor, unwed Jewish teenage girl. And do you know what a manger smells like? It ain't pinecones and peppermint, I can assure you. And yet *this* is the story of Christmas. The spectacular intertwines with the mundane – the highest of highs with the lowest of lows.

I want to start off this morning by just reading you a long passage from the Christmas story. We're going to shift over to Luke's gospel, because he's the one to really expand on Mary's story. So I'm going to read from **Luke 1:26-45**. This is the famous passage on the annunciation. We see this interaction between Mary and an angel – what she is told and how she responds.

Really we see Mary receive a gift and open it. There's no denying how important gift-giving is to our Christmas traditions – and again we can pull a Jesus-juke on that...*or* we can realize that the tradition ultimately points to the gift that God has given to all of humanity at Christmas time. So let's just listen to the text and then we'll talk about it.

26 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. 28 The angel went to her and said, "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."

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” 35 The angel answered, “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.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “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!”

So not only here do we get news of the gift coming into the world through Mary – the very Son of God and savior of the world.

But we see how Mary responds to the gift – and she responds perfectly. We all talk about how some people can be hard to shop for, but how many of you know some people are hard to *receive* from? You ever open that gift and your first reaction is to recoil in horror?

When they were young, we intentionally taught our kids how to respond when well-meaning relatives bought them clothes for Christmas that would look great on a child from the Victorian Age – “A tweed 3-piece suit for an 8 year old, THANK YOU! I always wanted one of those! (*Psst*, Mom, don’t cut the tag.)”. Not all gifts are the same.

I read a study that 75% of women have been let down by a gift from a partner. That’s compared to 47% of men. So either we’re less picky or you’re just better gift givers – I’d wager on the latter. But the article gave some tips on receiving a problematic gift – it’s a three step process. The first thing is you smile – always smile, because your face is not your friend, it’ll give you a way faster than words ever can. Then you use the gift in a sentence like you’re at a spelling bee using the word in a practical application – “A vacuum cleaner – useful for making dirty carpets clean.” And then you just say, “Thank you.” There’s a skill to receiving gifts, especially problematic gifts.

And Mary got a gift that's very difficult to return. "A baby out of wedlock! How did you know?" But she nails it – she receives it perfectly. And in receiving the gift of Jesus – essentially accepting Jesus into her life – Mary gives us some direction on how we can do the same. The angel concludes the message in verse 45 with, "Blessed - or transformed - is he or she who really believes this happened." Transformed is the life of those who really, really, really believe the miracle of Christmas happened. That's the present, that's the gift. So how do you open it? How do you believe it? How do you experience this? How do you get this in your life?

Well, you take a look at what Mary did, and we have four things Mary did that are extremely helpful for us. These are helpful for you no matter where you are in your spiritual journey. No matter where you are! – some of you have been Christians for years and some of you aren't Christians yet. These need to be a part of your spiritual tool-kit. Here are the four things that changed Mary's life: *furious thinking, honest doubting, committed community, and sincere surrender.*

The **first** thing was **furious thinking**. Intensely furious thinking. The translators have a difficult job here. There's almost no way to translate it properly. Because there's so much more here than meets the eye in one simple word.

Look at v. 28. "The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.'" What does Mary say? Notice Mary does not say what you'd expect a person in a legend to say. "What an honor! The Lord has sent me an angel." No. What does she say? It says, (v.29) "*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and **wondered** what kind of greeting this might be.*"

Let me tell you what it literally says, and then you'll see what Luke was showing us. The word "wondered" is the Greek word *dialogizomai*, which means to logic through something, to think rationally. *Dialogizomai*. You can hear it in the word; "logic", "dialogue". It means "to think through, to intensely analyze" – furious thinking. What kind of greeting is this? She is sitting there saying, "Is this a hallucination, or is this a dream, or is this the real thing?"

She is going through categories of possibilities, and she is saying, "Am I seeing things?" Now this isn't the way you write a legend. No, if you're going to write a legend that's supposed to promote the piety of the faithful, you present the hero with a little more confidence, "And the angel appeared unto Mary and said, 'Greetings oh highly favored one.' And then the highly favored one says, "Greetings right back at you." That's how you write a legend, but that's not what happens.

Here's what Luke tells you happened; the angel appeared, and Mary sat there and said, "Am I seeing things? Are you real? What's going on here? I can't be seeing this. What's the matter? This is weird." In other words, Mary is reacting just the way you would react. Just the way I would react.

You might be tempted to say, "Well, I'm a modern skeptical person. Back then, people were primitive. They believed in these things, but I'm different." No, no. Mary is reacting exactly like you would have. She is *dialogizomai*. She is trying to think logically through it. She is trying to figure out, "What in the world? How do I account for this? Am I dreaming? Did I eat something? Is this a flashback? What is going on here?"

Let me show you how it works. Let's enter in here. Let me help you do the same thing she did. How do you account for this? That's what she is saying. She is saying, "How do I account for this data?" See? She did not have a paradigm for this. She did not have a worldview that included angels and visions and things like that happening to her. Okay, now let's do it with us ourselves.

How do you account for the fact that Mary - or maybe let's just say Luke - these early Christians believed God had become flesh, and the one he had become, a human being, Jesus Christ, needed to be *worshiped*? How do you account for that? Would you *think* with me? Think it through. Was this a kind of development, you know, a trend out of Greek thinking? No. There was absolutely nothing in Greco-Roman thinking at the time that would lead to this.

Everything about their worldview said, "Matter is bad. The physical is bad." They mean nothing. Nothing! There was nothing in that culture that would ever lead anybody to believe the creator God would become physically human. Oh, okay. Eastern religions then - is this sort of a development, an extension of Eastern religions? No. Eastern religions believe matter and the physical is an illusion, that it's going to pass away eventually because ultimately we're all just spirit.

So not western or eastern strains of religion. Well, how about the Jews. Listen, there was absolutely no way this developed out of Judaism. The last people in the whole world who would ever believe some human being should be worshiped would be the Jews, who didn't even speak God's name, don't even *write* God's name, even to this day.

I took a class in my doctoral studies on Jewish Theology after the Holocaust – it was powerful. But in preparation for an assignment I listened to a lecture by Rabbi Joshua Haberman on contemporary Jewish messianic expectations. Of course Jews believe in the coming of Messiah – it’s a key prophetic element of the Hebrew Bible. I once had another Rabbi tell me, “We Jews and you Christian’s are both anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. It’s just that you think he’s making a return trip and we think he’s coming for the first time!”

So contemporary Jews absolutely believe in the Messiah. But in this lecture, Haberman went out of his way to emphasize that nothing about the anticipated Messiah is divine. It will just be a man – a very smart, talented man – but to *worship*... that would be rank heresy, blasphemy. This was most certainly not a Jewish idea.

So what the angel is announcing to Mary – the incarnation, God in flesh - this is not the development of any cultural trend, this wasn’t an evolution of philosophical or theological thought. Absolutely not. This is a bolt of lightning out of blue sky. There is no cause we know of. There is no intellectual cause. There’s no social cause. So I want to ask you a question. How would this group of Jewish people - the last people on the face of the earth to believe a human being could be worshiped - where did they get this idea?

Another way to put it is what must have happened to them to overcome their enormous cultural and intellectual resistance to such an idea? C.S. Lewis used to say, “The reason I believe in Christianity is because nobody is brilliant enough or crazy enough to have thought this up.” Now that’s a clever statement and yet there are decades of *dialogizomai* behind that statement. Lewis was an Oxford professor – this is a bright guy - who converted to Christianity as an adult. A lot of thinking went into his faith.

And I want you to do that too, because if you say, “Well, it’s hard for me to believe in Christianity...” I have people come to me fairly regularly and they say, “I just wish I could believe. I mean, you know, I have a sister who believes, but I can’t. I have a brother who believes, but I can’t. I wish I could.” It’s clear by the way they speak, they’re just saying, “It hasn’t *hit* me.” Well, it *doesn’t* just hit you. It starts with thinking.

Are you willing to think? Are you willing to reason? Are you willing to wrestle with the hard questions? Are you willing to admit when you really have no better way to account for the data of, “Why did these people believe?” and, “Why did hundreds of people say they saw Jesus Christ rise from the dead?” In other words, faith is *more* than thinking but not *less*. It’s more than furious thinking but not less. It *starts* there.

The second thing Mary demonstrates is, Honest Doubting. Isn't this interesting that her first response is not, "I am the Lord's servant." Her first response is, "*How will this be?*" Those are the first words out of Mary's mouth, "Say what?" There's a process going on here. The angel speaks to her, and she is saying, "I must be seeing things." "How will this be...?" You know there are a *couple* ways to ask a question like that. There's the rhetorical kind of question, which really doesn't want information. It's just rejecting and dismissive. "How can this be?" That's proud and cynical and cowardly, because you don't want to know.

But there's another way to ask the question, which is not a cynical, rhetorical way, but a request for real information. "How can this be?" That is marked not by cynicism and pride but by humility and bravery. It's brave to doubt, to doubt in such a way that you're really willing to listen for some answers. It's much easier to just nod and agree and not rock the boat.

It's humble and brave to doubt and absolutely necessary. Do you notice what he says in response to her doubt? **V.37**, "*For nothing is impossible with God.*" That's a great verse. There are a lot of people that have taken comfort in that verse over the years. But we wouldn't even *have* that verse if Mary hadn't doubted.

See, Mary got into a process. She was asking questions. Questions are good. God loves questions – if He doesn't, there sure are a lot of them in the Bible. See there *is* a kind of doubt that God hates. It's proud and cynical, and it's a way of trying to avoid the truth. Really it's cowardly. But there's a kind of doubt that God obviously solicits and rewards. You have got to be willing to not just do furious thinking but - even when it still doesn't make sense - to stick with it and to keep asking questions.

So Mary actively thinks and she doubts and the **third** thing she does is she **Commits to Community**. Notice something interesting. Mary asks the angel, "How can this be?" The angel answers two things. Not only does he say, "For nothing is impossible with God," but he also says, "Go see Elizabeth." It's important to see she does not break into her "Magnificat" - the great "Song of Mary" that starts in verse 46 – but she does not break into her song immediately after she talks to the angel. She has to talk to Elizabeth first. She has to process it with Elizabeth – bounce it off a friend.

I had a very supernatural experience in my life several years ago – about this time of year actually – when I was called into ministry. I was going to be a lawyer since I was 8 years old and half way through my time at UT, God said, "Hey, I'd rather you do this pastor thing."

And I won't go into the details because this is Mary's story, not mine, but I remember that after that happened, it took me a bit to go public with it. I didn't tell Deanna right away – we weren't married, but were dating seriously. I didn't tell my parents right away. I processed it with a few wise people who were a little further along in life than me, who knew me well, and who could give me some direction. What does this mean?

I want you to know almost nobody comes to God without community, without talking to somebody who knows a little bit more about it than you. You can't be a lone ranger at this. You can't just slip into SWFF and slip out and read some books and not want to make yourself vulnerable by saying to some other people, "Here are my doubts. Here are my questions." It just isn't going to work. You have to be in a community. You have to process things in community. That's just how God set it up – we are dependent on one another, even the mother of God.

And then the **fourth** and last thing we see from Mary is **Sincere Surrender**. Finally **v.38**, "*I am the Lord's servant,*" *Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."* You know, one of the most interesting things about this birth announcement is the parents, Joseph and Mary, are not allowed to name the child. Did you notice that? It says, "You are to give him the name Jesus." Right? See? Parents are always allowed to

name their kid. That's part of the deal. We can name it any stupid thing we want. What did Kanye West name his daughter, "North" – North West! That's legal! I grew up in school with a girl who's legal name was "Snow White". Her parents *did* that! *You* get to name *your* kid. Why? Because you're older, and you're in charge.

Jesus is the first person ever born who was **older than his parents**. This is what the angel is trying to say with the name business, "*You* don't manage him. *He* manages you. You want him in your life? You don't manage him. He manages you." I know all kinds of people who say, "I'd like to become a Christian, but does that mean I'm going to have to drop my girlfriend because she is not really big on faith? Does this mean I'm going to have to spend less money on myself, because I really like *this* and *that* sort of activity? I'd like to become a Christian, but do I have to do *this* and *this* and *this*?"

See, you're doing a cost-benefit analysis. Here's what you're saying, "I'd like to give God the lordship of my life *as long as* I can stay in control." Ultimately, after all the thinking, at some point you have to say, "I don't even know what it's going to bring into my life. I don't even know. But the fact is, because he has done all this for me, I give up the lordship of my life. I give up the control of my life. I say I'm no longer the lord of my own life. Jesus, *you* are the Lord and I am the servant."

At some point, you have to do that. Don't say to me, "Well, I've tried, and I've tried. I can't believe," when ultimately you're not willing to do *that*. See, thinking is good, but at a certain point you come to realize you aren't going to get *all* your questions answered. Nobody gets *all* their questions answered about anything. If you wait for *all* the answers you'll never get married, never have kids, never take that job. At some point you have to say, "Well, I know *enough*..." and then you just jump. It's a scary thing. That's not something anybody *likes* to do, that's why it's called surrender. As long as you're trying to *be* god, you can't surrender to God, see?

The only thing that leads you to do it is when you see that He gave himself away to you. I don't know what other kind of God you could submit to, because in this case, you have a God who already submitted to you, in a way; a God who already gave himself away for you. He totally gave himself away. At Christmas, God says, "I'll do better than meet you half-way, I'll come all the way down and *become* you." No other religion gives you a God like that. Therefore, you should trust Him.

It comes down to this. If God was willing to do all this to get near you, what are you willing to do to get near Him? It doesn't matter where you are. I mean, some of you say, "I know I'm not a Christian." Are you willing to identify yourself as a seeker? Some of you are scared to do that.

Some of you are just scared to give up control. Now, hopefully, you'll know here at the end of the sermon maybe your problem is not so much the first three; it's the last one. It's not furious thinking – you're down with that – but it's a willingness to sincerely surrender.

Some of you *are* Christians, and you know your prayer life stinks. You have absolutely no fellowship with God. Do you think God would do all this to get near you and be happy with the level of relationship you have with Him? There are all kinds of things you need to do to deepen that relationship. Look at what it cost Him to get near you. Whatever it costs you won't be the same. Now you need to go get near Him. Whatever that looks like for you. If you do, His power will overshadow you, and we'll all be little Marys.

Guys, don't get gender sensitive here. That's why I love this "mothers of Jesus" idea – the Bible transcends all traditional notions of gender. The ladies get to be called "sons of God" and the fellas get to be "brides of Christ". This is something to be proud of. Get a sticker and put it on the back of your truck, right next to the gun rack, "I'm a little Mary." We'll all be Marys if we're willing to say, "Let it be unto me. Do whatever you want in my life. I am your servant. I give up the rights to try to control my own life."

You do that, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and God's life will be born in us and reborn and renewed. That's the meaning of Christmas – what a gift. And you open that gift the same way Mary did; furious thinking, honest doubting, committed community and sincere surrender.

We have a Father in Heaven and He is our *ultimate* example through His Divine Son at Christmas. But don't forget to cast a glance at the Mothers of Christmas as well. Be like Tamar, be like Rahab, be like Ruth, be like Bathsheba, be like Mary....but *most* of all let's be like the one to whom they all point.

Let's pray...