

The First Christmas: Mary's Story

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[0 : 00] a short series, three sermons, about the first Christmas. Wouldn't you love to be able to sit down with Mary, just like we've seen in the video, and just to be able to talk to her?

And I want you to keep something in mind this morning. I didn't say it in the first service, but I'll say it now. This is Mary after she's had the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you know that her perspective then would be different than it was beforehand, right? And all of us, when we read the story, we read the story secondhand, but we read it after the fact.

And when you look back on something and you tell somebody about something, you see it in a different perspective than you did before it actually took place in your life.

You understand what I'm saying in that? Every event in life is that way. Once you've gone through it, you talk about it from a different perspective than you did before you went through it. Especially if it's a scary, frightening kind of experience in life.

[1 : 04] There are things that you've endured. In fact, those of you women in this room who've had babies, you know it was different the second time than it was the first time, right? Because you kind of knew what to anticipate.

And you saw the outcome of it. And there's not that sense of fear, I wouldn't think, the second time, third time around that it was the first time around. And so this morning, we're going to look at this story from Mary's perspective.

I want you to listen in on a conversation that she had with an angelic being in Luke chapter 1. If you have your Bible, turn there and look with me to Luke chapter 1 and verse 26.

And while you're turning, let me just say to you that in this story, the next story and the final story we'll see, we're going to be looking at two perspectives all the time.

Not years ago, but weeks and weeks ago, when I first preached here at Pickens, I remember there was a sermon. I don't remember what it was about even. But I told you at that time that Paul warned us in Ephesians 6 that there are two perspectives always going on in our life.

[2 : 13] One that we're very keenly aware of and one only occasionally we recognize. And he warns us it shouldn't be that way. He tells us in Ephesians 6, you're not struggling with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers in high places, right?

So what it says is there's a lower story and then there's the upper story. The upper story refers to what's going on in the heavens that's invisible to us that we don't see.

But right this very minute is going on. You understand it, right? In the heavens right now, while we're down here on the earth worshipping the Lord, there are activities going on in heaven that God and the angels are aware of that you and I are completely unaware of unless they intervene in our lives somehow and speak to us and make us keenly aware.

This is one of those occasions where God sent an emissary, a messenger, to speak to Mary prior to her becoming pregnant. She's not pregnant at this point in time, but he's telling her as an engaged young woman about what is going to transpire in her life.

And so he's affording her a privilege of knowledge about that which is the upper story. But there's also the lower story that Mary has to deal with after this message is delivered and after what he says has come to pass, she's going to have to go out there and flesh it out with her mother and with her dad and with Joseph and with her friends and neighbors and the people of Nazareth.

[3 : 45] And so in the upper story, it's a glorious, jubilant story of celebration because God is going to finally bring about this plan of redemption by entering our world as a human being.

And the angels in heaven are parting. It's a time of great, great, great joy. But on the lower level, man, it's a time of conflicted emotions.

There's joy that she feels, that any mother feels when she gives birth to a son or a daughter. But there's also a lot of anxiety. She's 70 miles from home.

She's, in all likelihood, a teenager, young, middle-aged, older teenager. We're not sure. Probably 14 to 18 years of age.

She's never been married. She's never been with a man. She's having this baby with only Joseph at her side.

[4 : 49] She's not in a hospital, not in a medical clinic. There's no midwife there. She's all alone. And so you can imagine the questions, the bewilderment that's going on in her mind and heart and all the social abuse she has no doubt received to this point in time.

Look with me to what Luke tells us in chapter 1 and verse 26. In the sixth month, let me just stop there. That's not a reference to the calendar sixth month.

He's not saying that this took place in what we would know as June 1st of July. What he's telling us is it's six months from the time that Elizabeth got pregnant.

Now, Mary, as you're going to see in a minute, she doesn't even know Elizabeth is pregnant. He doesn't mention her name at this point. But that's what Luke is alluding to.

Luke knows this as he's writing. So he says, in the sixth month, alluding to Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. And then he goes on to say, The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.

[6 : 07] Gabriel is one of the angels of God who uses, he uses as an emissary to come and on occasion make great announcements.

He's going to speak in a dream to Joseph. He's going to speak to the shepherds in the last sermon we're going to see just before Christmas. He's going to announce the birth of the Lord Jesus in the city of Bethlehem.

And so we know that it's Gabriel who's sent to Mary. And then he says, Now, I hope you get out more than the people do in the first service, okay?

Because when I ask this in the first service, only two people raised their hand in the whole room.

How many of you have ever been to Royston, Georgia? Good. Y'all have cars, right?

I don't tell you. I'm just teasing. When I went to Royston for the first time in my life, I was 20 years old. I was a student at Anderson College. And this fellow who went to school with me, he was an older guy, and he was a pastor of a church down somewhere out in the country out of Royston, Georgia.

[7 : 14] He said, Ralph, would you come preach to me? Well, there are only two things I remember about that occasion. One is these vultures were on this tiny little bridge on this road I had to cross, and they wouldn't get off the road. And I was in a little Volkswagen and just had to wait for them to fly because I was afraid to go through them, right?

The second thing I remember, though, is this. When I came into the city limits of Royston, there was a sign there. How many of you know what I'm going to say? Anybody here? There you go.

Home of Ty Cobb. I don't even know if that sign's still there. It had him swinging a baseball bat. I was a huge baseball fan. Ty Cobb was one of the greatest guys to ever play the game of baseball, right?

Let me tell you something. If you had gone to Nazareth, you wouldn't have seen a sign like that about anybody because it was a small little sleepy town, and nobody was known for having been from Nazareth.

That's why the Scripture tells us that Nazareth was a place that nothing good ever came out of, as she said, even in the film.

[8 : 18] Look at verse 27. To a virgin, this is who he's going to, engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David, the virgin's name was Mary.

And so what we read here is he's going to go see Mary, who is engaged to this man named Joseph. Let's just stop and talk about that for a minute so you get the right picture.

You know all about engagement in our culture, the Western culture. In our culture, boy meets girl, boy asks girl to marry him, drops to one knee.

She says, I do. He puts a ring on her finger. They set a wedding date, right? You've been through that. You've seen that portrayed many, many times in movies and people you know. It's happened in your own life.

Maybe not as dramatically as they make it appear on the movies all the time, but that's basically how it goes. Boy meets girl, asks girl to marry him. She says yes. He gives her a diamond. They set a date, they're married, right?

[9 : 20] In biblical times and in many places in the world today, in fact, I've got a friend who's got this kind of marriage, it's arranged by the parents. In fact, this friend of mine who's an Indian doctor, he's hoping to be able to arrange marriage for his children.

And before you, you know, just dismiss that idea, I'll tell you, it works in a lot of cultures. We're a culture that doesn't do it that way, but it doesn't mean it's a bad practice. And so Joseph, his parents had picked out Mary in all likelihood.

And Mary's parents had picked out Joseph, and they had come to some kind of agreement. And when both parties, Mary and Joseph, and the parents had agreed, we're going to be married, they became engaged.

And that engagement period, the best we can tell, lasted for exactly a year. During that time, they were considered by the people who knew them, their parents and all their friends, to be married. They didn't think about them the way you and I think about engaged people today. They saw them as being married, but living apart. She didn't enter his house, he didn't go to her house, they didn't sleep together.

[10 : 34] There's nothing sexual, physical going on between these two. But they're beginning to understand each other, and growing fond of each other, and developing a relationship with one another.

And in the eyes of the world, they're married, but in reality, from our perspective, they're not. So look back at what the Scripture says. He goes to see a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. Now, this word virgin, years ago when I was in college, a lot of the translations began to come out that time, NIV and a host of others, and there was great argument about this word.

Some scholars argued this shouldn't be interpreted virgin, it should be interpreted maiden. Because they argued that in other places, the word was used to speak of someone who was a maiden who was unmarried, and in other texts, a maiden who was married.

But here we know clearly it's a foolish argument because of what we find in verse 34. Mary asked the angel, How can this be since I have not been intimate with a man?

[11 : 47] Mary herself acknowledges that she is a virgin. And Mary is the only one who knows, right? And so it's clear that the interpreters have it right here when they interpret this as virgin.

To a virgin whose name was Mary. Look at verse 28. And the angel came to her and said, Rejoice, favored woman, the Lord is with you.

Now I want you to hear what he's saying, but I want you to be careful about this. Don't overshoot the runway as some of our Catholic friends at times have.

What he says is precisely this and only this. Mary, you are blessed of women. Here's why she's blessed.

She's blessed because God has favored you. He's not saying, Mary, you're a perfect specimen of a woman.

[12 : 51] He's not saying, Mary, you are absolutely without sin and thereby, because of your worthiness, God has chosen you to bear His Son to our world.

He's not saying that in the least. What he's saying is this, Mary, you are very, very fortunate. You are blessed of God. Now, did Mary feel blessed in the moment?

I don't know. I think part of her, because she's speaking with an angel, had to feel as though, boy, there's something special about this moment. And I certainly am blessed of God. He says I'm blessed of God.

There's no reason to doubt that. But I want to tell you something. Before he gets through and before this conversation is over, she's going to be wondering, why in the world was I ever picked? Why has God chosen me for this station in life?

So, is she a good woman? There's no reason to believe she wasn't. Is she a godly woman? Again, I can't imagine she was not. But is she the best woman in Nazareth, the best woman in Israel?

[13 : 56] There's not a trace of reason for us to necessarily reach that conclusion. Look at verse 28. Verse 28 says, And the angel came to her and said, Rejoice, favored woman.

The Lord is with you. But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. Well, that's understandable, isn't it? Wouldn't you be perplexed and confused? And wouldn't you be asking a lot of questions? In fact, if this weren't just a regular preaching service, you know what I'd do right now? I'd come down off this stage and walk through the audience and ask a lot of you, a lot of you ladies, and even some of you girls in the audience, what do you think's going through her mind? Don't you think she's wondering, why are you talking to me about this? Why has God chosen me? Listen, the pregnancy part hasn't even entered the conversation yet. You're aware of that because you know the rest of the story. Like I said earlier, you're looking back on this, having the knowledge of what has already occurred. But at this point, here's all she knows. I'm just a little Jewish girl engaged with this guy named Joseph.

[15:05] I've got plans for my life. This angel shows up. By the way, any of you ever talk to an angel? I didn't think so, right? That's kind of cause for alarm.

That's kind of cause for you to have a little bit of angst and a little bit of concern and wonder what's going on. But you know this is an angel, and he says to you, you are blessed of God. You are favored of God.

And she's wondering, why in the world is this occurring? And why is he talking to me like this? And why have I been chosen? And what have I been chosen for? What lies ahead for me? Look at verse 30. Then the angel told her, don't be afraid, Mary. If it were me, I'd have said too late. I mean, already I'm afraid.

For you have found favor with God. Don't be afraid. Understandable, the angel says that to her, right? He can probably look in her face, and he can see some fear.

[16:04] He can see a little bit of anxiety. He can see some concern. Who wouldn't have that? Especially a teenage girl. Let me ask you something. You ladies in this room, do you think differently as a 20-something than you did as a teen?

Do you think differently as a 30-something, a 40-something, a 50-something than you did as a teen? It's hard for most of you in this room who are grown women in society to even go back in your mind and put yourself in the place of a 15-, 16-year-old girl, right?

Because your thinking is so evolved, and it is so changed through the years. So imagine, if you can, what one of your children or your grandchildren that age would be thinking if they had this occurrence with this angel, and the angel says, boy, you are blessed of God.

God has favored you. God has chosen you. Now he comes to the bombshell, verse 31. Now listen. You will conceive. Can you see her just hit the floor?

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus. Jesus. You're going to conceive, and you're going to have a baby boy, and you're going to call this baby Jesus.

[17:22] Boy, I don't know what part of that would shock you the most, that you're going to be pregnant. She's not really even married yet. She's not living with a man. And that you're going to have a boy, and here's the kicker, his name is going to be Jesus.

Now Jesus is the Greek for the Hebrew Joshua. And every child growing up in Israel knew the name Joshua because Joshua was a great Israelite war hero.

Remember the story of Joshua and Caleb? They're two of the 12 spies that go into Canaan. They spy out the land. They come back, and they give a good report. Boy, it's just as you said, Moses, just as God said, we can go in and we can take this land.

The other 10 spies said, no, we're not able to. They'll look at us as grasshoppers. They'll defeat us. There's a big argument that ensues. Moses says, you've disappointed God.

You're going to be punished for that. Now they rise up and say, let's go and take the land. Moses warned them, don't do that because now God has changed his plan. He's not going to give you the land. They go ahead anyway. They're soundly defeated, right?

[18:26] So after 40 years of wandering, Moses dies, and guess who God brings to the forefront? It's this man Joshua.

He becomes the commander of the Israeli forces. They go in. They capture Jericho, and after that, all the other cities in the conquest, and they settle in the land. So what he's saying is this.

You're going to have a son. This is a special son. He's going to be like Joshua. Joshua, he's going to be a savior of his people.

Now, don't think ahead too much because if you think she's thinking at this point a spiritual savior to come and to save the humanity from its sins, you're just wrong.

What she's thinking is he's going to be a military leader, commander like Joshua. And just as Joshua drove the people out of the land and we settled in the land, he's going to drive the Romans who are occupying the land out of the land, and we again will be free as Hebrew people.

[19 : 38] Well, look at the very next verse. Verse 32. He will be great and be called the son of the Most High. Now things are changing.

And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David. Son of the Most High? Is he referring to a man here? Or is he referring to something more than a man?

What is this, the son of the Most High? And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David. You know what she knows about Joseph? Joseph is of the house and lineage of David. And so as his stepfather, even though he's not the biological father, he's entitled then to the throne of David himself. Look at verse 33.

And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end. Now in her mind, it's confirmed. The Lord is going to allow her to be pregnant, and she's going to be pregnant with this son who is of the house and lineage of David, and he will take the throne.

[20 : 50] He's going to drive the Romans out, and there will never be an end of this kingdom. Can I tell you something? That's not what the angel has in mind at all.

What the angel has in mind is he's going to be the very son of God. He's going to come to that in just a moment. He's going to be the very son of God.

And that's the reason when you study the Gospels, Mark doesn't mention the nativity at all. Matthew and Luke give us a nativity from the lower story, and John gives us the nativity from the upper story. He doesn't even concern himself with the narrative of the birth of Jesus. This is what John says in John 1.1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And then it says in John 1.14, And the Word became flesh, and we beheld His glory, glories of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. So what Gabriel is saying to her is, you're literally going to bear the Son of God.

[22 : 02] Now, notice what she says, and she's not even thinking yet about the Son of God. Verse 34, Mary asked the angel, How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?

She's still thinking about Joseph. He's of the house and lineage of David, and so in her mind, how in the world can this be, that I'm going to be pregnant, and all that's going to come about, we haven't consummated our marriage yet.

How in the world can this be? It just doesn't make sense. In the heavenly scene, it makes perfect sense, because God is a God of miracles, right? But in the lower story, what do we know in the lower story?

In the lower story, we know this, the way you have babies, is a man and a woman come together. Unless a woman is with a man, it just doesn't happen, right?

That's why we know, that Mary's going to endure horrible shame, and people are going to say terrible things about her, maliciously, that are wrong, because when she looks at her folks even and says, I've never been with Joseph, they're going to believe her?

[23 : 20] When she says to her friends, and her neighbors, and her schoolmates, I've never been with a man, and she's showing, she's six months pregnant, are they going to believe her?

In fact, let me ask you this, Joseph who knows he hasn't been with her, he's the only one who knows that, but Joseph knows, we've not been together.

What is even Joseph going to think about Mary? Is she going to believe this story about an angel? You can imagine the hardship that she's about to have to endure.

So Mary asked, how can this be since I've not been intimate with a man? Verse 35, the angel replied to her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and listen to this, and try to take this in, and think of this, your 15, 16, 17 years of age.

Those of you who are older than that, and that's most of you in this room, I want you to backpedal to that point in time. Okay? The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the Most High, speaking of God, will overshadow you.

[24 : 28] Therefore, the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. That's what he says. I'm 69 years old.

I'm a graduate of two Baptist colleges, two Baptist seminaries. I've read the Scripture all my life. I've studied theology. Not as well as some, but I've studied theology.

Can I tell you something? That goes right over the top of my head. I understand the big picture, but to understand how that comes about, I don't know.

There is nothing sexual implied in what Luke just tells us, what he records Gabriel as having said. But how that occurs, I don't know.

Other than to tell you that's a miracle of God. I say that to say this. If it flies over my head at 69 and over your head, and you've read the story and know what occurred, how do you think Mary felt?

[25 : 44] What do you think Mary makes of that? when the angel Gabriel says to her what he says in verse 35. So he looks in her eyes.

What do you think the angel sees when he looks into Mary's eyes? You've probably never thought about that before. But he's looking into Mary's eyes. How do you think she looks? I don't know. She seems to me to really have it together.

She's less afraid than the others he's talked to. How do you think she looks? You know what I think? She looks perplexed. She's wanting to accept this and you're going to see later she does.

But there are just huge question marks all over her face. So here's what the angel Gabriel in his brilliance given to him by God says next. He's going to give her a means of affirmation.

Look at verse 36. And consider your relative Elizabeth. Now watch this. The second he says that, And consider your relative Elizabeth.

[26 : 48] You know what happens? I can tell you right now. Her eyes perked up. Her ears perked up. Because that's a name she, now she knows something. I know Elizabeth. Consider your relative Elizabeth.

What about Elizabeth? Well, look at what he says. Even she has conceived a son. See that word even? In other words, can you believe it?

Even she has conceived a son in her old age. And this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. Remember reading the Old Testament when women couldn't have babies?

That's what they labeled them. They were barren. It was a term of shame. It was something no woman at that time wanted. Every woman in that day and time wanted to be able to bear babies.

And so they had labeled her barren. Mary had no doubt heard Elizabeth referred to in that fashion. And then he says, For nothing will be impossible with God.

[27 : 47] You know what he's done? He's given her a means of at least partially making sense of what he has said.

He says, I know you're taking all this in, but consider this. Even your relative Elizabeth is now six months pregnant.

Mary goes, What? I can see her mouth drop open. What? Because her relative, we know from other passages, is way, way, way up in years.

Remember when Gabriel visits Zechariah when he's ministering in the temple? And he comes to Zechariah. He's in the holy place. And he says, You and Elizabeth are going to have a baby.

Remember Zechariah's response? What? We're old. We've tried lots of times. That's not going to happen. How will I know this is going to happen?

[28 : 43] And the angel says to Zechariah, Here's how you'll know. Here's a sign. You're going to be mute. You'll not be able to speak until that baby comes. And when it comes, you name him John. He's referring to John the Baptist.

Now, you've got to understand this because our culture is so different than hers is. She didn't know anything about this. Her relative is in another town miles away.

But in our culture, we know everything instantly, right? I mean, we can stream it. We can text somebody. We can get on the internet. We know everything that happens in seconds. But not so in her world.

And so, this angel has just told her something that just blows her mind. So, how does she confirm it? Well, look down, if you will, at the beginning of the passage, right immediately after this passage.

Look at verse 39. In those days, Mary sat out. This is right after this conversation with this angel. In those days, Mary sat out and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judah where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

[29 : 51] When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She goes and sees for herself Elizabeth is expecting a baby.

Now, I don't know, have you got a 90-year-old aunt, a 90-year-old grandmother? Can you imagine, you go see that aunt, a grandmother, a relative, and they're way, way, way, way, way past the point of childbearing and here they are, six months pregnant.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine your shock if you saw that even today, right here in Pittsburgh, you just encounter, that's what Mary encountered and then Elizabeth turns to her and says, Mary, you are blessed of women.

How so? My baby, when he heard your voice speak to me at the door, it leapt within my womb.

You, Elizabeth knew, she was favored of God.

You know what all that did? It affirmed for Mary that everything the angel Gabriel had said was absolutely true. Now here's where you're going to have to backpedal with me for just a moment, okay?

[31 : 09] That occurs after the conversation with Gabriel. At this point, you've got to adjust your head and think and understand, Mary's still in the dark.

She's been told, you're going to have this baby, you're not married, the Holy Spirit's going to overshadow you, God's baby's going to be placed in your womb. And by the way, she says, how can this be?

I've never been with a man. By the way, your relative Elizabeth is going to have a baby. That's just what he says. She hasn't seen that at this point in time.

Right? Everybody with me? She doesn't know that for a fact. I want you to notice what her response is. And I bring all this to a close. Verse 37, for nothing will be impossible with God.

Boy, if there's anything you'll take away today, take away that. If we could live in the constant remembrance of that statement, it would change how we pray, it would change how we live.

[32 : 12] The angel says, listen, I know this is way beyond anything you've ever imagined, but keep in mind, nothing is impossible with God. Believers, I want to tell you something. Here at First Pickens Day, if we could just embrace that, how it would change our life.

There's nothing impossible with God. Verse 36, excuse me, verse 38. Here's her response. I am the Lord's slave, said Mary.

May it be done to me according to your word. Then the angel left her. So Elizabeth, sight still unseen, is referred to by this angel.

And when this conversation is over, she goes and sees for herself and when she sees Elizabeth and sees that she's pregnant, blows her mind, but then she knows everything is true.

But here's the big thing. Before that ever occurs, before she ever leaves tiny Nazareth, before Gabriel ever departs, she makes up her mind already what her feeling about this is going to be.

[33 : 19] She turns to him and says, pretty mind-blowing, I'm the Lord's servant. So whatever he wants, it's okay.

Whatever his will, may it be. Boy, that's a picture of faith, isn't it? Now you get a little bit of an idea why God maybe chose a woman like Mary.

Didn't have all the experience that other mothers had. But I'm going to tell you something. That kind of heart, she says, I'm the Lord's slave. You know the thing about slaves?

They're not decision makers. Slaves aren't planners. Slaves aren't strategists. Slaves don't call the shots. Slaves are doers.

Slaves obey. They just follow the course that the master is set for. And so when she hears all this, she's trying to take it in. And I'm going to tell you, at 69, I can't begin to take it in.

[34 : 26] But this little young woman takes all this in. She just simply says, I'm the Lord's slave. May it be as he will. You know what bothers me about me a whole lot?

The older I get, I wonder where my life's going. I wonder what's going to become of me. How do one day all end? The older I get. I think about that a lot of days.

What will my end be like? Where's my life going? How's it all going to end? I wish I thought about it less. I wish I could just live in the moment and not think about those things at times.

I want to tell you something. The freest you will ever be in your life will be when you can come to the place you will say, whatever you will, I'm okay with it.

I don't understand it. Maybe it wouldn't be what I'd choose myself. I want to tell you something. If she'd been given an option, hey, you want to have a baby out of wedlock? Hey, you want to?

[35 : 33] No. My daughter's getting married at the end of December. She's got big wedding plans. Everything going on in our house right now is about weddings. She would hate like anything for any

of that to get disrupted.

But Mary says, okay, I got plans. I know where I'm going, but if that's what you want, then so be it, God. I'm okay with whatever you got.

You're not where you are today. Because I'm going to tell you, as a person of faith, that ought to be where you want to be. Whatever you want, oh God, it's okay about me.

I'm going to challenge you to do this right now without, because you don't know what the future holds for you, right? Some of you got things up in the air, health concerns, or you got family situations, or job situations, or children situations, and you don't know where they're taking you right now.

But I wonder if in the next few moments, as we have this hymn of invitation, if you would pray something like Mary said, God, I don't understand all this. Not smart enough to get it.

[36 : 42] But whatever you will, I'm okay with it. I put myself in your hands. It's okay. Brian, lead us. Let's stand as he sings.

George, sir.

God. Go.