

**At the Manger: 3. Mary, a Servant of the Lord**  
**Luke 1:26-38**  
**December 12, 2021**  
**Pastor Tami Luckhardt**

We continue our series on the cast of Christmas characters from the story of Jesus' birth. What do we really know about these characters? And how can anybody from the first century have relevance in our twenty-first century world? Last week we looked at Joseph, usually depicted as the silent figure in the Nativity who stands in the stable watching the action unfold. We learned that there is more to Joseph than we thought. We heard stories from the Catholic and Protestant traditions that were different. I'm just wondering, did some of you go home last week and look at the Joseph in your Nativity set to see if he is an older man or a younger man? Joseph, a carpenter, was an ordinary man called by God to do something truly extraordinary that required he step outside his comfort zone and say yes. And when we step outside our comfort zone and say yes to that nudge, that call from God, that sense of God at work within us, something truly amazing can take place in our lives.

This morning, we turn to another character - a person we know more about - who is mentioned frequently in the gospels. Aside from the baby Jesus, his mother, Mary, may be our favorite. But what do we really know about Mary? Who is this elusive woman that some revere and some almost ignore? What wisdom does she have for us on preparing for the coming of her son this Advent? As we learned last week, the early Christians were curious about Mary and Joseph. By the mid second century, some of the stories about them were written down. One such book is the Book of James, not to be confused with the Epistle of James in the New Testament. In this book, we learn Mary's parents' names were Anna and Joachim, that her birth was an answer to their fervent prayer. At the age of three, Mary was taken to the temple for dedication and left under the care of the priests until they found a husband for her, Joseph, when she was around the age of 12.

We Protestants don't know much about Mary. We only consider her one Sunday a year and that's the third Sunday of Advent (today) when we read a portion of her story from the first chapter of the gospel of Luke. Mary was a peasant girl chosen to facilitate the arrival of the Son of God into the world. We are grateful for her role in the Christmas story, but for most of us she is not a major character in the Bible. However, in the first chapter of Acts, it tells us that Mary was with the disciples following Jesus' Ascension as they awaited the day of Pentecost. She was a presence in Jesus' life not only at his birth, but throughout his life and then within the church as it was forming. The first Christians recognized that no one knew Jesus quite like Mary. No one loved him quite like Mary. No one person is more responsible for our salvation in Jesus than Mary, the mother of our Lord. And when you look at it that way, why shouldn't she have a place of honor in the church.

Unlike Protestants, Catholics worship Mary. In fact, this week I did a Google search of Catholic Churches in the area, and I found names like St. Mary of the Lake, Immaculate Heart of Mary, Our Lady of the Lourdes, and Our Lady of Grace. Those church names say a lot about who Catholics believe Mary to be in relation to their faith. Mary acts as a go-between with us sinners on earth and God in heaven. And so, Catholics not only worship Mary, but they also pray to Mary. Why do they do this? She is not God - not part of the Trinity. Why not just pray to Jesus? During the Middle Ages, when the church's leadership became more and more distant from the people and so much emphasis was placed on the holiness of Jesus, it made it difficult for people to approach Jesus. So, Mary became important in the prayer lives of the common folk. She was seen as one who could empathize with their plight and mediate forgiveness. In the

councils of the Church through the centuries, she gradually gained in supernatural qualities. She was declared free from personal sin before her birth and to this day. She remained perpetually a virgin. She did not die a natural death but was taken directly from earth to heaven. This is known as the Assumption of Mary and in 1950, the Pope made this part of the official teachings of the Catholic Church. Early Christians and Catholics today believe that even in heaven, Mary will hear us and will keep interceding for us. There is nothing in scripture to say this is wrong. But the Protestant reformers also could not find any reference in the New Testament of prayers to Mary and so instead, turned the focus of their prayers to Jesus himself. I'm not saying we should, or we should not pray to Mary, but hopefully now you have a little better understanding why Mary is honored.

In today's scripture, we learn that Mary was in Nazareth when she received the angel's announcement that she would have a baby. Nazareth was a little town - so small, it wasn't even found on first century maps. The people of Nazareth were poor, uneducated, peasant people. Nazareth was a town of nobodies.

Just before Mary was to give birth, the emperor required a census, and everyone needed to return to their hometown. For Joseph, which was Bethlehem, 80 miles from Nazareth. It would take 3½ to 4 days to walk. Although the scripture does not indicate how they traveled, let's hope Mary at least had a donkey on which to ride. Do you get the picture here? Mary, 12 years old, still reeling from what it must mean to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit and to be carrying God's son. 9 months pregnant, leaving Nazareth and now 4 days on the back of a donkey. Even though it was over 26 years ago, I still remember what it felt like being 9 months pregnant; the persistent lower back pain, swollen feet, how difficult it was to catch my breath and oh, the countless trips to the bathroom! I can't even imagine what that 4-day journey must have felt like to a 12-year-old girl.

And then I think of that night when Joseph came out of the inn and told Mary - "There's no room", she must have been terrified, in tears, perhaps the labor pains had already begun. So, they entered the stable. Luke tells us it was a moment of great joy, but it did not come without pain and suffering. Fast forward through the next 33 years and where do we see Mary? We see her off to the side, watching and listening. Throughout my life, that's where my mom has been. She keeps up with what I am doing and although she lives in San Diego, she worships with us online every week. She's the first person I call when I have really good news to share. She is also the first person, after my husband, that I call when my heart is heavy with worry or grief or when I need advice on an important decision. And for Jesus, throughout his life, Mary was there, watching, proud and excited.... and frightened for him.

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, some of our family gathered for the first time in almost 2 years to celebrate Thanksgiving but also to meet our 8-week-old grandson, Arlo. During our time together, I watched and listened as my 87-year-old mother held that new baby and recalled stories about her pregnancies, the dreams she had for her own children and her worries today for her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

I think mothers, both birth mothers and adoptive mothers, worry about their children no matter how old they are. Of all our children, our son Mark gave me the most reason to worry when he was growing up. You see, Mark loved adventure. The faster, higher, and more challenging it was, the better. He climbed high things and then jumped off them. Once he went heliboarding. Are you familiar with that sport? It is when a helicopter takes you to a remote area of virgin mountain snow and drops you off at the top of the mountain so that you can snowboard down, usually in areas that are off limits. When Mark graduated from college, he went to live in the hills

of Guatemala for 4 months to prepare for a U of MN Engineers Without Borders project. The day before he left, I asked him how he was planning to get from the airport in Guatemala City to his work site over 50 miles away. He said, "I don't know." "What do you mean you don't know. You need a plan. This is a third world country! You can't just show up and rent a car." "Mom don't worry about it. Figuring it out when I get there is part of the adventure!" Can you see why I worried about this kid? Fortunately, now that he's the father of 3 young boys, he's become a little more concerned for his safety, so I worry about him a little less.

So, I can't help but wonder if, as Jesus grew into a man and started his ministry, and Mary heard reports of his fearless teaching and growing enemies, if she worried. Did she flash back to the manger that night when she held him in her arms? Or did she flash forward in an anxious vision of a future, like Michelangelo's depiction of Mary holding the crucified Jesus? How she would hold his crucified body across her lap, yearning, too late, to cradle him and protect him again. Like the lyrics in the song ask, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?" I wonder if she knew. During Jesus' life, no human suffered more than Mary.

Now here's one more thing that I hope you'll remember about Mary. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was pregnant, the angel called her "blessed." She was told that she had found favor with God. What a strange blessing this would become! We often associate blessings with the good life - good health, good family, and good wealth. You must be blessed - you are living the good life. Yet Mary, God's favored one, a 12-year-old from a town of nobodies, was blessed with a child out of wedlock. She was chosen by God to bear the Messiah and this blessing was not to be confused with ease or comfort or a well-being. In fact, it was quite the opposite. She would face whispers behind her back from those who knew she conceived out of wedlock. She still faced the task of telling Joseph she was with child. And for the rest of her life, she would face the difficulties that came from being the mother of Jesus - fleeing to Egypt when Herod sought to kill the child, watching as others sought to destroy Jesus when he began his ministry and finally standing by as he was crucified. This is what blessedness looked like for Mary. Biblical scholar William Barclay says, "The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it."

So, to experience blessing from God does not mean we are going to be happy all the time and only good things will come our way. Suffering comes for a variety of reasons - even when we are faithful to God. When we look at the images of Mary in our Nativity sets or Christmas cards, she looks calm, cool, and collected - surreal, like a figurine in a snow globe. But Mary was a real person who lived the sweaty, gritty reality of God's plan - and because she was willing to say, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. May it be with me just as you have said," she found blessing.

When we say "yes" to God, we are saying "yes" to serving other people. We're called like Mary to be open to God's blessing in our lives and say, "use me however you can, however you want." And then to pay attention to see how we can be modern day angels (messengers from God) to come alongside and encourage, bless, and care for others. Just over this past month, you have done this in many ways through projects like Habitat for Humanity where we're sponsoring a home build just a few miles from here. In fact, there are 2 workdays coming up and more team members are needed. If you want to hear more about this just connect with me or our Missions Team Leader, Linda Seaton. Another way you have served others this month is through the Messiah work team that is helping at Sunrise UMC, a tiny UMC church in Mounds Views that needed help with renovations on their parsonage. Just last week, you gave a carload

of socks and underwear to the non-profit organization called The Drawer. They will assure that these items are delivered to folks who are in dire need of them this winter.

And a few Sundays ago, it was Commitment Sunday where we ask every member of Messiah Church to make a sacrificial pledge so that ministry can continue to happen in the upcoming year. And if you haven't had a chance to do that yet, I invite you to do that today. If you are worshipping online, just underneath my picture you can find the box that says 2022 Commitment Card. And for those of you in the room, you will find these same commitment cards on a table in the atrium.

Every year at Messiah Church it's our tradition to give away our entire Christmas Offering that is collected throughout the month of December. It's the largest offering of the year and it all goes to help people in need. This year, half of it will benefit children from low-income families right here in our community through the Totes for Hope food shelf and the other half of it will go to benefit children living in poverty in western Kenya by building a well at the Mali Mali Primary School through the organization called H2O for Life. The total goal for this offering is \$25,000. I know that is a big and audacious goal. It's much bigger than most of us could ever do on our own. But by working together and giving sacrificially, we can do this. And by doing this, you are saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. May it be with me just as you have said."

In 1958, Martin Luther King, Jr. was stabbed with a letter opener while signing books in a New York department store. The letter opener came within an inch of his heart. While he was recovering in the hospital, he was interviewed by a reporter who said, "Dr. King, if you stay on this path, you are going to be killed. Don't you want to live a long life?" And Dr King replied: "I'd like to live a long life. Longevity is much to be desired, but I must do the will of God for my life." He wasn't saying, "God protect me." He was saying, "God use me." That's where Mary was when she responded to the angel with these words: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. May it be with me as you have said." Let's be open - especially in this season - to a blessing from God.

**Let's pray:** O God, how grateful we are that you sent your angel Gabriel to Mary to announce to her the amazing thing you were doing in her life that would change the world. We thank you that you gave us Jesus, your light and your love incarnate in him to teach us about your love and who you call us to be. Help us to be Gabriel to someone this week to step outside our comfort zone and say yes to that nudge. Help us pay attention to those around us so to see who needs a word of encouragement or hope. And Lord, help us to have the heart of Mary so that every day in every situation we may say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. May it be with me according to your word." Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 12, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** Eternal God, may I receive once again your gift of love into my life. Open my heart so that your gift will find me anxiously wanting to be your child each and every day of my life. In the Spirit of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

### **Monday, December 13**

#### **Scripture: Luke 1:26-27; John 1:45-46**

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth." Nathanael responded, "Can anything from Nazareth be good?" Philip said, "Come and see."

**Observation:** As Luke began his story about Jesus' birth, he told of a divine messenger appearing to Zechariah, an aged priest, in the imposing Temple in Jerusalem, Israel's capital city. But that was just prologue to the main story. The main story came from Nazareth. Pilgrims came from all over the Mediterranean world to Jerusalem, but Nazareth was not on any pilgrim's wish list. It's likely that most citizens of Judea (southern Israel) had never heard of Nazareth.

**Application:** The town where Mary lived was not the kind of place to fill its young people with lofty ambitions. In the text from the gospel of John, we see that Nathanael didn't think coming from Nazareth said anything promising or good about Jesus. His doubts likely reflected a common opinion in the area, and yet we only know about the incident because, after meeting Jesus, Nathanael became one of his followers. When has God used an unexpected person or ministry to uplift or deepen your spiritual life?

**Prayer:** Lord, when I sing "this is my Father's world," that song reminds me that you are at work in all the obscure places of our world as well as in the powerful and famous. And you want to work in me, no matter how obscure or famous I may feel. Amen.

**Tuesday, December 14**

**Scripture: Luke 1:26-27; Matthew 13:54-55**

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary.

When he came to his hometown, he taught the people in their synagogue. They were surprised and said, "Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother named Mary? Aren't James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers?"

**Observation:** Luke told his readers that Mary was "engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house." We need to know something about Mary's fiancé to grasp her story. She lived in the tiny village of Nazareth, but the slender evidence in the gospels suggests that Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown. If so, their families probably arranged the marriage.

**Application:** In Israelite culture, an engagement was as binding as marriage. Mary was pregnant? People (like Joseph at first) would "know" some other man was to blame. Some later implied that Jesus' father was unknown (John 8:39-41). Some might have called for Mary to be stoned to death. But Matthew 1:19 said, "Joseph her husband was a righteous man." He wanted Mary safe even if she'd let him down. How have you learned to face distress in a measured way like Joseph's?

**Prayer:** Lord God, when you chose Mary, you also chose Joseph. He could have prayed John Wesley's covenant prayer ("Let me be full, let me be empty") as he played his supporting role. Give me his spirit. Amen.

**Wednesday, December 15**

**Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38**

A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Aram.

Aram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.

Abijah was the father of Asaph.

Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.

Joram was the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah was the father of Jotham.

Jotham was the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.

Manasseh was the father of Amos.

Amos was the father of Josiah.

Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers.

This was at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon:

Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.

Abiud was the father of Eliakim.

Eliakim was the father of Azor.

Azor was the father of Zadok.

Zadok was the father of Achim.

Achim was the father of Eliud.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar was the father of Matthan.

Matthan was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.

Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. People supposed that he was the son of Joseph son of Heli son of Matthat son of Levi son of Melchi son of Jannai son of Joseph son of Mattathias son of Amos son of Nahum son of Esli son of Naggai son of Maath son of

Mattathias son of Semein son of Josech son of Joda son of Joanan son of Rhesa son of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel son of Neri son of Melchi son of Addi son of Cosam son of Elmadam son of Er son of Joshua son of Eliezer son of Jorim son of Matthat son of Levi son of Simeon son of Judah son of Joseph son of Jonam son of Eliakim son of Melea son of Menna son of Mattatha son of Nathan son of David son of Jesse son of Obed son of Boaz son of Sala son of Nahshon son of Amminadab son of Admin son of Arni son of Hezron son of Perez son of Judah son of Jacob son of Isaac son of Abraham son of Terah son of Nahor son of Serug son of Reu son of Peleg son of Eber son of Shelah son of Cainan son of Arphaxad son of Shem son of Noah son of Lamech son of Methuselah son of Enoch son of Jared son of Mahalalel son of Cainan son of Enos son of Seth son of Adam son of God.

**Observation:** Both Matthew and Luke listed Jesus' ancestors to provide a story of God's unfolding history leading up to the promised Messiah. Hebrew genealogies (like Matthew's) generally began with an ancestor and read forward; Greek genealogies (like Luke's) did the reverse, reading backward from the present to the past.

**Application:** Casual readers sometimes get confused. If you go name-by-name, these two genealogies differ at some points. Luke's, by going all the way to "Adam son of God" emphasizes how Jesus is for all people, and it connects the first human with God's Son, who is the Christ." This was one way Luke emphasized the Christian conviction that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. In what ways can it matter to you that Jesus entered fully into our human experience?

**Prayer:** O God, you have always been willing to work with anyone who is willing to work with you. Thank you for giving me the privilege of joining the long list of people who have served your great redeeming purpose in the world. Amen.

**Thursday, December 16**

**Scripture: Luke 1:26-28; Daniel 8:15-18**

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"

Now I, Daniel, needed help understanding the vision I saw. Suddenly standing in front of me was someone who looked like a man. I then heard a human voice coming out of the center of the Ulai canal. It called out: "Gabriel, help this person understand what he has seen." Gabriel approached me, and I was terrified when he came. I fell with my face to the ground. Gabriel said to me, "Know this, human one: the vision is for the end time." As soon as he said this to me, I fell into a trance. My face was still on the ground. Then Gabriel touched me and set me up on my feet.

**Observation:** Luke reported matter-of-factly that God entrusted the angel Gabriel with the crucial message to Mary. But who was this divine messenger? Devout Israelites knew. They'd become familiar with his name in the visions of the Old Testament book of Daniel. There, as "someone who looked like a man," he brought messages from God to help understand the apocalyptic visions.

**Application:** Daniel said he met Gabriel when he "needed help understanding the vision I saw" and was praying. Mary, as far as Luke reported, seemed to have been just going about her daily

business when the angel approached her with the divine message. In what settings have you had the clearest sense of receiving a message from God?

**Prayer:** Keep me alert, Lord, so that wherever and however your message comes to me, I will be able to hear, accept and act on it. Amen.

### **Friday, December 17**

#### **Scripture: Luke 1:28-33**

When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

**Observation:** Living in the obscure town of Nazareth, Mary had no reason to expect to lead a life that was exceptional. When God's messenger greeted her with the words, "Rejoice, favored one!... God is honoring you," Luke said the words confused her. With eyes that saw things human eyes could not, God had chosen her to become the mother who would miraculously bear the Messiah who all Israel had awaited for centuries.

**Application:** Gabriel's words to Mary evoked Isaiah 9:2, 6-7's brilliant promise. It said a descendant of David would bring "a great light on those living in a pitch-dark land." He would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." It was not just a promise—it was THE promise at the heart of all God's promises. Can you imagine Mary's feelings as it slowly dawned on her that she was the one who would bear the long-promised child?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you were, and are, the dawn from heaven, the light in the darkness that my life needs. Open my eyes to take in and rejoice in the continual dawning of your light. Amen.

### **Saturday, December 18**

#### **Scripture: Luke 1:34-38**

Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God." Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

**Observation:** God's messenger promised that Mary would have a baby. But biological reality (Mary was a virgin) surely ruled pregnancy out. People in Mary's day didn't have all of our medical knowledge, but they understood the basics of human reproduction well enough to know a virgin could NOT be pregnant. So of course, Mary struggled to believe the angel's words. But in the end, she did. Young as she was (probably early to mid-teens), Mary knew she served a God who is free to do very unusual things. And the angel underscored that: "Nothing is impossible for God."

**Application:** Mary didn't try to hide her puzzled questions (verse 34), but she was open to the angel's answer. Her final response was an awe-inspiring model for us: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." What does it take for you to respond to God's call as Mary did? Do your life experiences help or hinder you from fully believing and trusting the good news about God's incredible love for you? What helps you trust that God is with you and for you through all the ups and downs of life?

**Prayer:** Lord God, from darkness to light, anguish and grief to hope, from death to life – you are always the God for whom nothing is impossible. I praise you for the joy and hope you offer me. Amen.