



## LIFE LESSONS FROM THE FIRST FAMILY OF CHRISTMAS: **MOTHER MARY**

Pastor Jeff Wood

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is unique in all of history, but we each have a history and she is a good template for all of our histories. Hear the word of God.

*Luke 1:26-38 In the sixth month, 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. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.*

There's a new first family coming to the White House, but there is right now an old first family coming to us in the scriptures, namely the first family of Christmas. Paul tells us in Romans 15 that whatever was written in the scriptures was written for *our learning*. (v. 4) So we are looking at what was written about those surrounding the birth of Jesus that we might learn from them. We assume that Jesus learned from them. So should we. What life lessons does God have for us through them?

In this series we have looked at Cousin John, Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Zechariah, and Father Joseph. All of them are a wonderful supporting cast for Jesus. Today we look at Mary, Mother Mary -- a young, Jewish teenager who is "with child" and shows us how to be "with God." Let's pray.

The story of Mary that we just read doesn't begin with Mary exactly. Rather it begins exactly with an angel of God and a message he brings. That angel and that message appear on the doorstep of Mary's life ... listen carefully ... simply out of the initiative and grace of God. It wasn't that she lived in the right part of town, had passed the right exams, did the right number of prayers, and then the coin dropped and the God blessing came out. Without any preconditions, God shows up free and clear.

All the religions of the world recognized as religions, and all the religions that people live by informally proceed this way – live like this and you'll be blessed, live like this and you'll be enlightened, live like this and you'll commune with God, live like this and

you'll go to heaven. Jesus didn't say, "Live like this and you'll have eternal life." He said, "I am eternal life." Jesus didn't say, "Do and then I'll come." He came and then said, "Receive." God comes to Mary. God comes on the same terms to you in the very same way.

The angel, Gabriel, arrives with an announcement for a very typical person. Mary is a teenager, a typical young woman on the brink of a typical adult life. She has a typical name. It was as typical then as now. Joe and Mary today. Joe and Mary then. Typical.

Mary lives in a typical town. She doesn't live in one of the Seven Wonders of the World type of city or a university center. Her Palestine is like our Indian River County. Typical.

She responds to Gabriel with nervousness and question marks. That's a typical response to a supernatural presence.

The angel commands her, "Fear not." Some commands are orders and some are supportive. This is supportive. Angel: "My imposing presence is causing your nerves to shake and that is truly understandable, but the true truth is that there is nothing harmful here, nothing but good. So, power through your body and mind's reaction with what I say, and take as real truth that you have nothing to fear."

He reassures her with, "Don't be afraid," an "It's okay" message, "It's going to be okay." This tells us that Mary reacts in what we would say is a regular, typical way. Mary's name is typical. Her town is typical. Mary's reaction is typical.

I'm putting on the screen now a portrait like, I think, the one I'm preaching about. The face today is a

little drawing done by a real teenager and it is of her sister, also a real teenager. Their ethnic roots are from the region of Palestine, where Jesus was born. The artist's name is Marguerite Dabaie (she goes by Margo). Let me tell you why I picked this photo. It's because it is so typical, so real and ordinary. She isn't made to look like Elizabeth Taylor or a European model. She is this real, middle-eastern teen. Mary's face is typical.

You know how many paintings there are of Mary with a halo on her head? Thousands. Google it. In them, Mary's unruffled. She's *St. Mary*. She's the mother of God. She's the Virgin Mary. She's the Blessed Mary. She's the Holy Mother. She's the Immaculate Mother. And while not wanting at all to disrespect Mary, I wonder if what happens with all those haloes is something that Mary herself would never want to happen, and God doesn't want to happen. Because I wonder if with them, we don't make her someone ... *different than us*. And that lets us off the hook somehow with this story?

How many of us are saying somewhere inside, "I'm not St. Mary"?

I like one author who wondered if the angel of the Lord came to Mary when she was at prayer *or scrubbing clothes*, or if, when the angel spoke, there was a shaft of light on her head *or beads of sweat*. If, when the angel got in front of her, it was at a convenient moment *or whether she thought it was more of an interruption*, if she was poised with the angel *or pretty frightened*, if she had been raised to think that she might be "the One" *or whether such a thought was just plain crazy*, if her family was doing okay financially *or whether they were glad for her*

*betrothal, because her going would relieve the family budget, whether she was especially pretty or regular in appearance. The biblical picture of Mary says to us, "I'm like you."*

How many of us are saying somewhere inside, "I'm no Mary"? I'm too interested in golf. I'm too young, too old, too little, too big, too poor, too rich, too plain, too insecure, too busy, too human, too sinful, too erratic, too real, too something. I'm too real, too typical, for God to do something Mary-like in me. Could you possibly see yourself doing that?

There is something in us that says with God, "Yeah, but." Yeah, but that was the Bible and this is reality. Yeah, but I'm too. Yeah, but this is different. Yeah but... Hear this: you and Mary, Mary and me are quite alike, much the same. God worked in her and the arresting good news is that he can work in me, he can work in you.

After, "Hello," the opening words of Gabriel to Mary are, "you are highly favored." That verb means favored by God and it is used only in one other place in the New Testament. The two uses make a clear point. In Ephesians 1 Paul says *you and I* as followers of Jesus are favored by God (v. 6). In other words, the experience of Mary when she was addressed by the angel can be the experience of each of us addressed by Jesus Christ, addressed by the Bible... when we are addressed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. What the angel brings to Mary, the Spirit brings to all of us. We're no different.

If the Christmas story and the Christmas Mary teach us anything, it is this: God makes his way into ordinary lives; he makes his home in and with ordinary

people. You cannot hide from the opportunities and work of God by being real and ordinary. You cannot be lost to the promises and work of God by being real and ordinary.

God does real work in real people. We look out through the windows of a church and talk about the real world out there, as if God and his work are somehow unreal. But God does real work in real people in real places, not just on Sunday, but on every day of the week.

Even now God's very own Spirit *wants* to press into the innermost places of ordinary lives like yours and mine and bring the Messiah there ... each of our very ordinary lives and do an extraordinary miracle there.

Do you believe this? Do you believe what I am saying? I'm not asking if you think it is interesting or if you think it is entertaining or if you think it is debatable. I'm asking if *you*, if you believe that God can create his divine life in *you*. It's important. Let me show you why.

Look at what happens in this story. Without any special actions on her part than trying to be normal with God,<sup>1</sup> the angel of God, the activity of God, the promise of God, the miracle-waiting-to-happen of God

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel says at first that Mary is 'highly favored by God.' Then he says that she 'has found favor with God.' It makes me wonder if God had simply come this one time with this huge announcement to which she now, for the very first time, consents. Or had he come before with small announcements to which she had along the way consented and that is how she has found favor with God? Could it be that many times we wait for the big chance to experience God and the big chance to serve God and all the while we have turned aside from the little chances?

simply shows up to Mary. But when it does, Mary has to decide whether she believes God can do something marvelous in her or not. God didn't say to her, and wouldn't ever say to her, anymore than he would say it to any of us, "You're going to have this baby whether you want to or not!" No, God wanted to birth a divine life in her, not demand a divine life from her. That's the way it is – God brings a promise to you that must be believed by you and then allowed into you. He wants to birth a divine life in you not demand a divine life from you.

We don't know if it was anymore than a peep of an "Okay," but Mary believed and *opened to God*. She accepted as really possible this amazing thought that God could do something marvelous in her. And, if you would have that life divine, you also must open to God.

Mary, in so doing, is the first New Testament disciple. We always think of the twelve disciples but this is the first disciple in the New Testament. This is what makes a disciple a disciple – God says, "Let me come *over you* to create a new life *in you*," and the person to whom he says this simply opens to God. In their own way they say, "May it be to me as you have said." That's it.

Wherever there is God's life in a person there has been this transaction. It isn't an immaculate conception forced by God's will nor a human conception achieved by our human effort. Rather it is a gift freely and graciously offered by God himself *and received* by your or me. No preconditions or haloes that make you worthy of his coming. He comes. He invites. We respond. It's that simple.

God may in fact be coming to you right now in the words of this very message. Right here in these ordinary words, he may be moving your heart in some strange way. Maybe he did it years ago, you know even now that that is what it was – God speaking to you. But you said then some form of this word: “No.” Say it was, “I can’t” or “I won’t” or “later” or “leave me alone” or “I doubt it.” But it was a “no.” And here he is today, still whispering to you as he has from time to time, whispering in the night sky, whispering in a page of the Bible, whispering from a book on your shelf, whispering, “Let me come over you to create a new life in you.” I want to say to you what the angel said to Mary. “Fear not.” This promise you hear is for your good. Be like Mary. *Believe* and *receive* the word of God. Amen.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

[revjeffwood@gmail.com](mailto:revjeffwood@gmail.com)

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