

Mary's Journey to Christmas

A young girl had a boyfriend. She got pregnant. She was scared. How could she face her parents. What would they say? Can't hide something like that forever. Her parents asked who the father was. They assumed her boyfriend, but, baby wasn't his. He loved her so much he offered to help raise the child with her. They married and found a small place. They had very little money, and no insurance. One evening, her water broke. There wasn't time to get help. He delivered the child and lay him in a manger.

The birth of Jesus to a teenage mother is a familiar story to most of us. But in the familiarity of this story, we often lose perspective on just how hard it must have been for Mary. We tend to jump to the happy ending - the birth of the Savior of the World and skip over the reality of what Mary must have gone through, the pain she felt, the emotions she experienced, and the journey she went on.

This advent season we're going on a journey to Christmas. Over the next several weeks we will visit this familiar story through four different perspectives - Mary's, Joseph's, the Shepherd's, and the Wiseman's. Although they were each a part of the same journey to the birth of the Messiah - we'll see just how different each of their experiences and perspectives were, and the lessons we can learn from each of them. Today we start with Mary, the teenage mom of the Savior of the World.

Let's pray

We'll start Mary's journey in Luke 1:26-38, so please stand and read aloud with me...

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. **36** And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38** And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Thank you, have a seat.

In Luke’s gospel, the birth of the Messiah actually starts with the story of another baby - a baby who would be born to Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was well beyond the natural years of child bearing. And her coming son, who would be John the Baptist, was very much a miraculous gift from God. It was in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy that Mary’s journey to Christmas begins with a visit from the angel Gabriel.

Luke tells us that the young woman Gabriel came to visit was a virgin, betrothed to a man named Joseph.

In biblical times, a Jewish marriage consisted of three stages. The first stage was when the two families agreed to the union. The second stage was the public announcement, or the betrothal, this was similar to our engagement today but far more serious. During the one year “betrothal” period the union could only be broken by death or divorce. Once the betrothal was announced, the couple was legally bound to each other. But they didn’t live together; they weren’t officially married; and they couldn’t consummate their relationship. But it was a legally binding agreement, and this second stage generally lasted about one year. And then the official marriage would take place with a week long wedding celebration and consummation of the marriage. According to Scripture Mary and Joseph were in the betrothal stage - pledged to one another but not yet intimate.

The Angel Gabriel came to Mary, whose very name means “exalted one,” and said to her, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

Now, there are plenty of times in scripture when we see people react in fear when they encounter an Angel - earlier in this same chapter, Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband and the father of baby John, feared the angel when he first appeared. Later in the story of Jesus birth the shepherds in the fields will fear the angels. Throughout the Bible we see Angels destroy cities, fight and win battles against Israel’s enemy (or even against Israel herself, when she disobeyed God). Angels often demonstrated God’s wrath, they were able to wipe out thousands of people in a single night. The first words out of an angel’s mouth when speaking to humanity was generally something along the lines of

“Do not be afraid.” So it’s interesting to me that we aren’t told that the angel Gabriel frightened Mary. Instead the Bible says she was greatly troubled at what he said, not at his presence. “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

Why would that greeting trouble Mary?

Now, I am NOT the geek with the Greek. I am however, a lady with Logos. And it is helpful to look at this passage in the original language. The angel gives Mary a fairly standard greeting “chaire,(Hi-ro)or Hail!” And then he says κεχαριτωμένη (ca-ri-**toe -O**) which in a literal translation would be something like “Hail one who has been graciously given a great kindness.” The verb here is in the perfect form that means, it is a completed action that has lasting results. Mary was graciously given a great kindness that still has lasting impact today. In fact, the lasting impact of the perfect verb is seen in Ephesian 1:6, the only other time this word is found in the New Testament, Paul tells us that we are κεχαριτωμένη (ca-ri-**toe-o**) in the Beloved. That same graciously given great kindness - that favor - God gave to Mary the mother of Jesus, has a lasting impact on us through the beloved child.

Now I know full well that I am not worthy of or deserving of that great grace. And I wonder if maybe Mary felt the same overwhelming sense of being unworthy, and that is what troubled her? Why would she out of all people be the recipient of this graciously given great kindness. And what great kindness was she about to receive? Gabriel is about to tell her...

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Of all the questions I would have asked had I been in Mary’s shoes, I’m not sure this would have been the first one. Hear me out, it was expected as a young betrothed woman, that she WOULD bear children some day. Gabriel didn’t necessarily give a timeline of when that was going to happen. So I don’t know that the news that I would some day have a son would have been what got me. I think I’d be more likely to question how it was that any son of mine and this carpenter I’m betrothed to would be “great” - the Son of the Most High? His dad would be Joseph, right? I think I would question how a child of a two poverty riddled nobodies was going to take the throne of a King. How would he reign over the house of Jacob since they were currently under Roman rule? I may have questioned how anyone born on earth could reign forever. Or

what kind of Kingdom has no end? I would have had A LOT of questions but Mary only had one. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And here is where we see the road map for Mary's journey. This is the path she will follow over and over again on her journey to Christmas. At every stop and around every turn, she will

encounter the **IMPOSSIBLE**
realize **BUT GOD**
makes everything **POSSIBLE**
YIELD to Him.

This is the path Mary follows and this is the path we can follow too. We all have parts of our journey right now that feel impossible. Maybe your journey to Christmas is marked by grief or loss this year. Maybe it feels impossible because of the struggles in your marriage or estrangement in your family. Maybe you doubt the Savior of the World would come to save YOU- not after all the things you've done. Maybe the journey to hope feels hopeless. Whatever it is in your journey right now that feels impossible, realize **BUT GOD**. These are two of my favorite words in all of Scripture. **BUT GOD** can make the impossible possible when we yield to Him.

Mary points out just how impossible Gabriels news is. She can't have a son - he can't be the Son of the Most high; he can't take the throne of David or reign over the house of Jacob in a kingdom that will not end, because she is a virgin and it would be impossible for her to conceive such a child.

And Gabriel responds with **BUT GOD**. He explains that God will do this, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And he points out that even now God is working a miracle in her cousin Elizabeth. Something that is impossible, God has made possible. And God will do the same thing for Mary.

So Mary yields, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her."

Mary chooses to believe that the impossible things that the angel proclaimed are actually possible through God, so she yields to God and to His word. She trusts that what the angel says will come true.

She will conceive a son.

They will name him Jesus.

He will be great, called the Son of the Most High.

He will be given the throne of his father David reigning over the house of Jacob forever
And of his kingdom there will be no end.

How God was going to do any of this, Mary didn't know, but she did believe He could,
so she yielded to Him.

How many times do I get stuck on the impossible in my journey and since I can't
fathom the way God could ever make it possible, I decide He can't. And since I don't
believe that He can, I don't yield, and don't give Him the chance to make the
impossible possible. Simply because I don't know how He would possibly do it.

Martin Luther suggests "There were three miracles of the Nativity:

1. That God became man
2. That a virgin conceived
3. And that Mary believed

And the greatest of these was the last."

Don't let your unbelief keep God from making the impossible possible.

There will be several significant stops on Mary's journey. Times when she will
encounter the impossible, BUT GOD will make it possible, so she yields. The first stop
is telling Joseph.

Stop 1: Telling Joseph

For this part of the story we turn to the book of Matthew 1:18-25

8 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20** But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." **22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). **24** When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Undoubtedly, this passage is more about Joseph than it is about Mary, and Pastor Greg will unpack Joseph's journey more fully in a couple of weeks. But this morning I want to look at what Mary may have been experiencing at this place in her journey.

She yields to God and his call on her life and accepts that she will give birth to the coming Messiah, But just because she has accepted her new role, does not necessarily mean everyone else will too. And she has some hard conversations in front of her. I imagine that one of those first conversations was with Joseph. We don't know exactly how that conversation went, but it's pretty clear Joseph felt like there has been a breach in the betrothal agreement. And he had two socially acceptable choices (because honestly, option 3 hasn't even entered his mind at this point). He can either have Mary stoned for being unfaithful or he can divorce her quietly.

Now, I want to pause here. Because this whole part of Mary's journey wraps up in a handful of sentences in the Bible, and most of that emphasis is on Joseph. We don't actually know what Mary was thinking or feeling during this time. So I have admittedly taken some liberties here, but I don't think I'm too far off. We do know that at least one night passed from when Joseph found out about the baby, to when he made the decision to stay, because the angel came to him at night. So for at least one very very long night, Mary didn't know how this would all play out.

Joseph finds out about Mary. And at some point - either immediately or after processing an unknown amount of time, he makes the decision to divorce her quietly. And while I'm sure Mary was relieved she wasn't going to be stoned, I have to imagine she was a little caught off guard. I mean, she hadn't been unfaithful. This was God's doing, not hers. It was because she HAD been faithful to Joseph and to God that this was happening in the first place. God called her favored! Surely being favored didn't mean she would end up some divorced teenage mother, scorned and shunned by society! That is hardly a great kindness! Is this what she agreed to do when she yielded to God? Where was God in this? Why wasn't Joseph included in some of this need to know information? Like her baby was the Son of God!! Who would one day reign forever!! And all these questions, this wondering, the impossible situation that she was in lasted all night long.

Have you ever had one of those nights that last a year? Nights that never seems to end. Hopelessness that just won't go away. Nights when you can't even fathom what life outside of the darkness of the night looks like? Psalm 30:5 tells us, "Weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes with the morning." The reality is sometimes that night feels like it just won't end, and the morning just won't come and joy is forever out of reach.

I don't know how long your night will last. Some of you have been in the darkness of night for years now. Some of you are just entering into the night, unsure of how to navigate in the midst of the darkness. And others of you are finally starting to see dim rays of a new dawn. It is in the darkness of night that we must remember BUT GOD. But God makes the impossible possible. But God DOES bring a new morning and joy WILL come again, and the darkness DOES pass. Even when that seems impossible, but God.

In the darkness of that night, regardless of how Mary may have been feeling, God was with her, she wasn't alone. And God is with you in the middle of your dark night. In the darkness of the night God was moving in ways Mary couldn't possibly see or know. And in the here and now, today, God is once again moving. You might not see it. You might not feel it, But He IS here. He is moving. Morning is coming and joy comes in the morning.

And when the morning finally comes, Joseph finds Mary and takes her as his wife. Joy comes in the morning. Mary encountered the impossible, a never-to-be husband, ready to walk away. BUT GOD made the impossible possible and both Mary and Joseph yield.

There are other stops and turns on Mary's journey to Christmas, but we don't have time to work through all of them. So we are going to jump to the end of the journey.

The Final stop: Beholding Jesus

Mary's journey to Christmas concludes with an actual journey to the town of Bethlehem to be counted in a census - while she was 9 months pregnant. Ask any woman who has ever traveled while pregnant and they will tell you, this was an impossible task.

Bethlehem was about 80-85 miles south of Nazareth and it was uphill almost the entire way. There is approximately a 1400ft change in elevation between Nazareth and Bethlehem. The young couple would be either walking or traveling by animal that entire time. Scholars speculate the journey took them almost a week, walking uphill for hours a day, while greatly pregnant. Only to arrive in a town packed to the seams with people and no place to stay. And, oh yeah, the contractions are starting. Impossible.

But God...who makes the impossible possible.

So again, I'm going to ask you to put yourselves in Mary's shoes for a minute. Men, this might be a little hard for you - you can ask Pastor Jim about kidney stones, I hear that is comparable, if not worse than childbirth. Mary is exhausted long before labor

ever starts. Just carrying an extra human around inside of you is exhausting, let alone traveling every day, uphill for a week straight. And even when you do try to rest it is nearly impossible to get comfortable when you're that pregnant. Sleep is also impossible, and you finally make it to Bethlehem, days later than you originally planned and there is no room. Anywhere. This isn't the quaint little country town you left behind, there is no family and friends ready to welcome you. This is a place packed with people, everywhere you look more people! And the cramps that started a while back are coming with more and more consistency and their getting stronger and you thought it was just from all the walking but now you're thinking maybe it's something more, like maybe it's time. And you're scared. Because you've never done this before and your mom isn't there to help. No one is there to help. Just Joseph and he's never delivered a baby before and you are about to become parents to the Son of God??? This is impossible.

But God.

Makes all things possible.

Joseph does eventually find a place for them to stay, some strangers take them in. And the baby comes with all the beauty and chaos that comes with giving birth. And Mary wraps him in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger.

Eventually some random shepherds show up wanting to see this newborn baby for themselves. And they're talking about "angels in the field" and "Glory to God" and "Peace on earth." Luke tells us in 2:18-19 **18** And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

One of my favorite things about the Bible is that no matter how many times you read it you can still see something new. So as I was reading this passage, I asked myself for the very first time who were all the "all who heard it"? Maybe you've already asked this question. But I never had. Now, I know many of us picture Mary and Joseph in a barn or stable of some sort with the animals away from the house and the people. But that's probably not an accurate picture for biblical Bethlehem. Some people might picture a cave where they kept the animals and this would be a little more accurate for the time but still probably not completely correct. Most homes in Israel had two parts: one for the family and another for the household's animals. And it is likely that this other section in the second part of the home is where Mary, Joseph and Jesus were. The Greek word that is usually translated as "inn" here is more likely a guest room in a the

primary section of the house. Mary and Joseph, then, could have been the unexpected guests, in a home so overcrowded that the baby was placed in a feeding trough in the part of the home where the household animals were. So it could be that “all who heard” the shepherds were the family that took Mary and Joseph in. Or the other guests who were staying in the inn part of the residence. They were probably all very aware that Mary’s baby was coming that night. Maybe some of the women even stepped in to help the new momma. We simply don’t know. But we do know that a bunch of shepherds showed up in the middle of the night or even early morning and that surely would have caused a commotion.

So this group of people who don’t know the full story, who haven’t been visited by an angel, who don’t know of the child’s miraculous conception, who don’t know He is the promised Messiah, hear the shepherds rambling about angels and glory and peace on earth. And, according to the ESV, they wondered at what they heard. Perhaps a more accurate description would be they were amazed at what they heard. The greek work here means to be astonished or surprised, wonder or amazement. They didn’t necessarily have belief nor unbelief, they were just amazed - wondering. But Mary - who once again encountered the impossible, experienced BUT GOD who made the impossible possible - yielded, and she treasured these things, pondering them in her heart.

I love these words.

I’m a verbal processor, I like to talk things out, *ad nauseam* at times, if you ask Erik. But there is something profoundly beautiful about an exhausted new mother - any mother, but especially the mother of the Messiah - taking it all in, treasuring what she knew just happened, hearing, seeing and experiencing all God had done to bring into humanity the Savior of the World, and pondering them in her heart. Mary knew whom this child was, and whom he would become. And she yielded to what God had done, what God was doing, and what God would do through this baby lying a manger. It was an impossible journey for Mary. BUT GOD. Made it possible. And she yielded.

She didn’t try to tell the shepherds or the people all that the angel told her. She didn’t try to explain to them who this little baby was. She didn’t try to process with Joseph how God was going to finish this baby’s story and accomplish all He said He was going to do. She simply pondered it all in her heart.

I'm all about sharing our story. I understand the importance of telling others what God has done and is doing in your life. But I also understand the importance of stepping back, getting quiet and pondering the things of God in your heart.

Where are you on YOUR journey to Christmas? Do you find your self unworthy of the great kindness God wants to graciously give you? Does the road He has you on seem impossible? And you can't even imagine how He could ever make it possible? Are you in the midst of a dark of night with no glimmer of the morning dawn? Are you weary from walking uphill for far too long? Or are you celebrating what God has done in your life and your family? Wherever you are, I encourage you to take some time this coming week and pondered it all in your heart.

You may be on an impossible journey... But God...makes the impossible possible. Your part is to yield to Him.

Let's pray.