

A Not-So-Planned Pregnancy

If you've got your bibles, go with me to Luke 1. If you're new around here, we began a Christmas series last week called *Not What You'd Expect*. And the big idea with this series is that when you give the Christmas story in the bible an honest, unfiltered reading, nearly every turn in the narrative is precisely not what you'd expect it to be. Now we don't always *pick up on that*, reading it in our modern setting, because a lot of us are so *familiar* with all of those twists and turns. But to anyone watching it play out at the time, it was *unfamiliar*, it was unpredictable, and it was unexpected. For instance, last week specifically, we looked at Jesus' lineage, also known as the very strange, very dry list of his names that kicks off the book of Matthew. But what we discovered that that lineage was no ordinary lineage, and that it has far more to say to us today than we might anticipate. If you missed that, feel free to go back and grab the podcast online.

Today though, we're going to hop over to the gospel of *Luke* for a bit and get our first introduction to one of these unlikely *characters* from the story of Christmas: we're gonna spend some time getting to know Mary, the mother of Jesus. Now, whether you've been around church much in your life or not, you probably are aware that Mary is a pretty central piece of the Christmas story. **One reason for that is that she kind of serves as the model of "faith" from the story.** But secondly, specifically because of the famous "virgin birth." Part of what makes the story so unusual is that Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes pregnant as a virgin. Which believe it or not, is not the *standard* way for a pregnancy to begin.

And I also know that *sometimes*, when Christians just casually gloss right over details like that in the bible, it can make the bible very difficult to get on-board with. So if you're here and you have doubt or skepticism about that claim, or other claims the bible makes, we first off want to tell you that our community is absolutely a safe place to have and express those doubts. We are aware that there are things in this book that are difficult to follow. And so know that if you are brand new to church or to the claims of Christianity, we're not expecting you to just instantaneously get on board with things like this. Because that's not what happened for most of *us*. Most of us didn't become Christians and just immediately stop wrestling with the more difficult claims of our faith. For most of us, following Jesus began a long process of wrestling and re-wrestling with those things. I know it's not always the message that gets communicated in church, but hear me say that it is okay to have faith and still wrestle with questions *about* your faith.

And what we're going to see in today's passage is that it's actually *ironic* to believe that faith and asking questions are opposed to one another. Because Mary, the *shining example* of faith that the bible focuses on in this passage—she has *plenty* of questions. She receives some quite surprising news, and she responds, not with “blind faith,” as it's often called—but rather with honest, questioning, thoughtful, *investigative* faith. And in the bible, that's actually what faith *is*. It's not taking everything at face value and never thinking or processing through it. Rather, faith (at least according to the bible), is choosing *deliberately* to trust God, even even in the *midst of your questions*. It's a willingness to *wade through* doubts and difficulties, rather than jumping ship at the first sight of them. That's much more what the bible means when it talks about “faith.”

And I think our story today bears that out. Today, in the story of Mary's not-so-planned pregnancy, I think we discover a lot about what faith *is*, and maybe just as importantly, what faith *isn't*. So let's take a look at it all, starting in v. 26:

*[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.***

So here's our introduction. In short, an angel shows up on the scene to talk with Mary, who is pledged to be married to a guy named Joseph. And then here's what happens, v. 28:

*[28] And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O **favored one**, the Lord is **with you!**” [29] But she [catch this] was greatly **troubled** at the saying, and **tried to discern** what sort of greeting this might be.*

So notice: Mary's initial response to this angel's appearance is not “oh lovely, an angel, just like I expected to see today.” No—she sees something out of the ordinary, and she *responds* as if it's something out of the ordinary. She responds like we would expect any rational person to respond: she tries to figure out what is going on exactly. When it says she “tried to discern” what was happening, that word *discern* more literally means “to make an audit.” Meaning that Mary responded in a very rational way—by trying to figure out what was going on before her eyes and ears. Mary apparently is not the naive, gullible type at all. She's a rational, thinking person.

Additionally, I also want you to pay really careful attention to the language right there in v. 29. It says that Mary was *troubled*, but by what specifically? Because it's not by the

angel *himself*. It says she was troubled by “the saying”—what troubled her was what the angel *said* when he showed up. What he said was this: “greetings, *O favored one*, the Lord is *with you*.” Now why would she be troubled by *that*? I mean I don’t know about you, but I would kind of *love* to hear that. If someone came to *me*, Kent Bateman, and said “greetings, *O favored one*, the Lord is *with you*,” I’d be like, “why, thank you.” I always knew God felt that way about me.” Right? That’s *great* news to hear. So why is Mary actually *bothered* by it? Why is it *troubling* to hear the angel say this about *her*?

Well it’s worth noting that in Mary’s day, people believed that if you were “favored by God,” you would know because of how financially well-off you were (much like some people still believe today, actually). In other words, if God *favored* you, your wallet and bank account would *reflect* that. People believed this, despite it not exactly being true, and despite God’s many efforts to show them otherwise. It was just widely believed that God’s favor = material wealth. And listen: *Mary* in the story was *anything* but wealthy. In fact, she was quite poor. We’re told later that her and Joseph offer two turtledoves or pigeons as a sacrifice at the temple, which is what people would offer if they were too poor to afford a lamb. So when this angel comes to Mary in her poverty and says “you are favored, God is with *you*,” Mary’s gut response was probably to think “oh no, you’ve got the wrong girl. Not me—there’s no way *I’m* favored by God.” That’s likely why she was “troubled” by what the angel said.

And to be honest, especially when she hears the next thing the angel says, she’s probably going to *wish* he had the wrong girl. Keep reading, v. 30:

[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.

You have to wonder at this point if she is thinking “so you’re telling me I’m about to be an unwed pregnant mother in a hyper-religious society, and you want me NOT to be afraid about that? This is an odd way to someone *not* afraid.” But that’s the news she’s given. And it’s not just *any* baby she is going to give birth to—look at v. 32:

[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.”

Now, those details about who Jesus would be and what he would do may not mean much to us today, but they would have been *clues* to Mary. As a young Jewish woman, Mary would've been familiar with most of this information—that one day a king would come who would sit on the throne forever and he would be the savior and advocate that the nation of Israel had been waiting for. So that idea *itself* is not lost on Mary. She knew that one day this Messiah would come.

What she probably *didn't* expect was that that king would come as a baby *in her own womb*. That part was a new development as far as she was concerned. The news the angel delivers to a skeptical Mary is “you're about to become pregnant. You'll give birth to a son and his name will be Jesus and he will be the Messiah that you and everybody else have been waiting for.” That's a rather intense thing to hear, right?

But again here, Mary again is actually very *rational* with her response. Take a look at v. 34:

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

Somebody paid *attention* in her sex ed class. Mary knows that our friend Gabriel left out a very important detail. A certain necessary part of becoming pregnant that she hadn't participated in just yet. And so she asks him, “how will this be?” I think sometimes we look back at stories from the bible and just assume they didn't ask questions because they were more *gullible* than we are. So we're like, “well of course they believed that a virgin could get pregnant—they were way more superstitious back then.” But here's the thing: believe it or not, virgins didn't get pregnant back *then* either. I think they had that particular part of biology pretty much figured out at that point in history. So they were just as skeptical as *we* would be, as this story (and most stories in the bible) would seem to indicate. Mary asks the question anyone would ask, back then or today: *umm...how's that gonna work?* In other words, “what you said doesn't make sense to me, so I need more information.”

Growing up, I feel the version of this story I had in my head, and from what I saw in all the Christmas plays, was something like “Mary, you're pregnant by the Holy Spirit!” And then Mary responds with: “Okay, that sounds totally normal to me!” It's like we often gloss right over the fact that this was a *dialogue* between Mary and the angel, where she asked questions, and was skeptical, and wanted more information. But that's exactly what it was.

So Mary asks, “how can this be?” Let’s take a look at the angel’s response. Keep reading, in v. 35:

[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.

So this baby in Mary’s womb will be the very son of God himself. The son of God that will come on a rescue mission to planet earth to seek and save what was lost, to die on a cross in people’s place for their sins. Which is *also* a very intense idea (maybe the most intense part of the story yet). But take a look at what the angel follows that with, in v. 36:

*[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.**”*

So the angel doesn’t say, “you’re just gonna have to get on board with this, Mary. This is the way that it is, have faith and believe it.” Instead he reasons with her. “I know this sounds unbelievable, so let me tell give you something to go on: your relative Elizabeth is *also* somewhat inexplicably pregnant as we speak. So even though everything I’ve just told you might be difficult to believe, as proof that God can achieve the impossible, Elizabeth is also miraculously pregnant.

Now I want us to camp out on *that story* for just a bit. Because there’s actually something really beautiful and yet subversive in how these two parallel storylines in the bible play out together: the story of Mary and Joseph, and the story of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. So, background: earlier in Luke chapter 1, Elizabeth and Zechariah get the news that *they also* are pregnant, and it *also* is a very unexpected pregnancy. But for them, it’s because they are both “advanced in years.” We don’t know exactly what age that means they are, but think *at least* “grandparents” age, if not “great grandparents” age. So just imagine if *your* grandparents came to you and said “hey guys...we’ve got some news...” Yeah. // And not only that, but we’re told that they had always struggled with infertility. So suffice it to say, them finding out they were pregnant was *very unexpected*.

But what happens is that when Zechariah *receives* this news, he isn’t having it at all. He won’t believe it. He’s cynical, he’s jaded about it all, and he says to the angel delivering the news, essentially, “yeah I don’t think so.” And because he responds that way, God

silences him until the day his son is born—makes him entirely mute for nine months. Now, here’s what’s so interesting about all of that (here’s why I give you all of that backstory): Zechariah was a *priest* by profession. Meaning it was his job to go into the temple on behalf of God’s people and burn incense. He was a “go-between” between God and the nation of Israel. He was set up as an *example* of faith. And yet when he hears about God opening his wife’s womb and giving them a child, he refuses to believe it.

And meanwhile, in a village somewhere, a peasant teenage girl named Mary finds out she is pregnant as a *virgin*, and *believes* it. Do you see the contrast there? It’s not that Mary doesn’t have questions. It’s not that she doesn’t *ask* those questions. It’s not that she isn’t confused. But yet, her posture is one of *belief*, while Zechariah the priest’s posture is one of stubborn *doubt*. In the story, when God wants to highlight a model of *faith* and *walking with God*, he chooses a young, unwed, pregnant teenage mother. Are you beginning to see why the bible says things elsewhere like “God uses the weak things in the world to shame the strong”? This again, is precisely *not* what we’d expect. **Zechariah is supposed to be the example of faith—not Mary.** But in the story it’s Mary.

And we see Mary’s faith front-and-center in v. 38:

[38] And [in response to that] 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.

So this is a beautiful response. Mary, who I’m sure has questions and doubts still swirling around in her mind, responds with a simple statement: “I am the Lord’s servant; if you say this will happen, then I believe you.” That’s her posture towards God. But my point, which you’ve probably picked up on by now is this: **Mary’s faith is not “blind.” Not by any stretch of the imagination. At nearly every point in the story, she asks questions, she investigates, she looks into things, she wants to find out more.** In fact, she takes almost *nothing* in the story at face value. For Mary, this model of faith in the bible, it’s clear **that faith is not an absence of questions, but rather an honest wrestling with her questions.** Even as she wrestles to believe, she *follows*. She *trusts*. She *listens*. She takes the next step of obedience. That’s the life of faith.

So let’s take a step back and attempt to bring everything we just witnessed into our setting today. If our goal is *faith*—if that’s what we’re shooting for—what can we learn about what faith *is* from this story about Mary? Or maybe more *pointedly*, how do we respond to difficult things in our faith the way *Mary* did, and *not* the way Zechariah did?

They both were faced with very surprising, unbelievable information from an angel, both struggled to believe it, but Mary apparently responded in faith and Zechariah responded without it. So what's the difference, practically speaking? **I think there are at least two things we can take away from this story (and the bible in general) as it relates to what *faith is*, and how to walk in it in our day and age.** First...

Faith is open-minded, not closed-minded.

On the surface, Zechariah's response to the angel, and Mary's response, might seem very similar. Zechariah says "how do I know this is true?" and Mary says "how can this be?" Those may *sound like* just different versions of the same thing. But in fact they were worlds apart. Mary's words were from a place of *trust*, but a trust that had questions. Zechariah's words, on the other hand, were laced with distrust and cynicism towards God. Zechariah could not see outside of the categories he had formed in his mind: "I'm an old man, we don't have kids, and my wife is infertile, and there's no way God would intervene in the midst of all that." But *Mary*, on the other hand says "I *want* to believe—but can you help me?" In other words, Mary was *open-minded*, while Zechariah was *closed-minded*.

You know, when we talk about "doubt," which is obviously very connected to faith, it helps to know that there are actually two different *types* of doubt. One type of doubt is like Mary's—a person who honestly wants to keep an open mind to the things of God, and just wrestles with what that looks like practically, or how it can happen. But there's *another* type of doubt too—what the bible more often calls "*unbelief*"—that is closed-minded and stubborn. It refuses to believe anything outside of its pre-existing categories.

As an example of the latter, the late physicist Stephen Hawking once gave a lecture at Cal Tech. If you don't know Stephen Hawking, he was this absolutely brilliant mind who spent nearly his entire life *theorizing* about how the universe works through studying space and time and matter. That's what he did. They actually made a movie based on his life a few years back some of you may have seen called *The Theory of Everything*. Brilliant guy. But in 1998 he packed out a 1100-seat auditorium there at the university to give a lecture on how the universe works. He wowed the audience with all of his theories about relativity and quantum physics. And at the end of the lecture, he was doing some Q&A with the audience, and at one point someone asked him the question "does God exist?" After a long pause, Hawking answered, dismissively: "I don't answer God questions." Now, that's so interesting to me. A guy who spends his entire life

hypothesizing and theorizing about unknown things in the universe—and the one thing he refused to hypothesize about is the one question that has plagued human beings for thousands of years. Stephen Hawking, the man who kept an open mind in regards to nearly *everything*, was completely *closed-minded* when it came to faith. As brilliant as he was, I think that’s an example of the second, *unhelpful* kind of doubt. The kind of doubt that shuts down conversations. The *closed-minded* kind of doubt.

So all of that to say, if you’re here today, and your doubt is the *closed-minded* type...if you absolutely refuse to believe that things outside of your preconceived categories might be true—that there might be a world that exists outside of what you’re accustomed to—you’re not going to get much of anywhere when it comes to Jesus (or for that matter, much anything else either). But you’re coming from a place where you want to keep an open mind—where you have doubts and questions about the whole Jesus thing, but you honestly are willing to consider that it might all be true, I personally believe, with everything in me, that God will meet you there. Because that’s precisely the place where faith starts. Faith is open-minded, not closed-minded.

Faith is humble, not arrogant.

Second, notice Mary’s final words to the angel in the passage. She says, “I am the Lord’s *servant*.” That is what we would call a statement of *humility*. It reveals how Mary sees *herself* in relation to *God*. What’s interesting to me is that Zechariah, who is *literally* a servant of God—he serves in the temple of God day after day—is missing something important when it comes to faith: the *posture* of a servant. Humility.

To honestly wrestle with the realities of faith, some degree of humility is required. In the story, Zechariah sits on this “throne” (so to speak) and demands that the angel *prove* things to him. Mary takes the posture of a servant, and says “I have questions, but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, because I am God’s servant.” You see, arrogance makes us say, like Zechariah, “my position is right until somebody proves otherwise,” arrogance says “every belief is on trial except for the ones I already hold.” *Humility*, though, like Mary, says “everything is subject to questioning, even (and especially) the beliefs I *currently* hold.” You have to be willing to question everything, even your own intellect and reasoning.

I love the way G.K. Chesterson puts it. He says:

*In dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt, it is not the right method to tell him to stop doubting. [Now quick timeout there: I get that that's a somewhat sticky statement, since Jesus *does* sometimes tell people to stop doubting. But in context, Chesterson simply means "asking questions." He's saying, "don't tell them they have to stop asking questions and thinking critically." *Instead*, he says...] It is rather the right method to tell him to **go on doubting**, to doubt a little more, to doubt every day newer and wilder things in the universe, until at last, by some strange enlightenment, **he may begin to doubt himself**.*

If you truly want to be an analytical, thinking, rational person, you have to be just as critical of your own belief system as you are of others. You have to be just as willing to consider that *you* might be wrong, as you are to consider that other *belief* systems might be wrong. In fact, what's so interesting to me is that repeatedly in the Scriptures, it's not *questions about God* that pose an obstacle to *trusting* in God—*that's not the problem*. It's *trusting in yourself* that's the problem. Take a look at just a few examples with me:

Proverbs 28:26: *Whoever **trusts in his own mind** is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.*

Proverbs 3:5: *Trust **in the Lord** with all your heart, and **do not lean on your own understanding**.*

Jeremiah 9:23: *Thus says the Lord: "**Cursed** is the man who **trusts in man** and makes flesh his strength, **whose heart turns away from the Lord**."*

So make no mistake about it: the problem *isn't* that we ask questions. The problem isn't that we sometimes wrestle with doubt. The problem isn't even *primarily* that we struggle to *trust* God at times. **The problem at its core is that we tend to only ever trust ourselves.**

Another way of putting that is that we all have faith of some sort. It's not so much that we need to learn *how to have faith*. It's that we might need to shift what our faith is *in*. We need to move it from being in what we can accomplish, what we are capable of, what we know and understand...and put it instead in what *God* can accomplish, what *he* is capable of, and what *he* knows and understands. We all inherently put our faith in *something*. The problem is that we are *most* inclined to put faith in *ourselves*.

And can we just be real honest about that for a second? We end up failing ourselves pretty often, don't we? We end up letting ourselves down pretty frequently, right? I mean how many times in your life have you been 110% positive you were making the right decision, doing the right thing, thinking about something the right way...and then a year, two years, five years down the road realized "I was 110% wrong about that." Like am I the only one that's had that experience when it comes to trusting in myself? So here's the invitation from Jesus—trust in someone better than yourself. Trust in someone who will not let you down like you have. Trust in someone who will never ever fail you. *That's* the answer. *That's* the way forward. That's the life of faith.

Now, that's not to say "God will always do things the way *you wanted them done*"—that's different. That's still just a version of trusting in yourself. But it is to say that if you're a follower of Jesus and you submit your life to him, he will be with you and for you until the very end. Pastor Tim Keller says that "God will either give you what you asked for, or he will give you what you *would have* asked for if you knew everything he knows." That's the promise: that's how *worthy* God is of our trust.

And if you ever doubt that God can be trusted with all of that, here's the assurance Paul gives us in Romans 8:

[31] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

If ever we doubt if God can be trusted, the place to look is to the cross: if the God of the universe did not even spare his own son's life for us, surely he can be trusted. If he could be trusted then, surely he can be trusted now. And surely he can be trusted even in the unexpected, even in the unideal, even when life isn't what we'd hoped. Surely still, he is worthy of our faith.

So let's do this. In just a few minutes we're going to respond as we always do by singing, taking communion, giving of tithes and offerings, all of that. But before we do that, I just want to read some passages over us about God's faithfulness. About how worthy he is of our trust. I pray these will be encouraging to you, that God will use them to help all of us *shift* our faith from ourselves, to being in God himself. Feel free to follow along on the screen, jot them down, or just close your eyes and let them wash over you—whatever is helpful to you to remember that this is who our God is:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Numbers 23:19)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (Lamentations 3:22-24)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

Pray.