



Last week we looked at the Christmas story through the eyes of Joseph. Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas. We learned even though he was a quiet, simple man he was outstanding because of his obedience. Time and time again Joseph demonstrated obedience in doing what the angel told him to do. He was a man of action. He was silent, but his life spoke so loudly he didn't need to say anything.

This morning we're looking at Christmas through the eyes of Mary. While Joseph is often forgotten, Mary is often put on a pedestal. Some say Mary was born without the taint of original sin. Others say Mary stayed a virgin through her whole life, having taken a vow of celibacy early in life. It's even been taught that Mary didn't die like the rest of us do; she was just taken right up into heaven. But none of those things are in the Bible.

Don't get me wrong. Mary was a remarkable woman. But as you might expect she's different than Joseph. What if I told you Mary isn't remarkable because of what she did but because of what she didn't do? Joseph is known for his outward obedience. Mary is known for something much more inward. Let me explain. Turn to the Gospel of Luke 1:26-2:20.

Mary's response to the birth of Jesus was contemplation.

Gabriel's announcement

Mary was a 14-year-old girl from a podunk town called Nazareth. Her parents arranged for her to marry a young carpenter named Joseph. We don't know exactly what she was doing, perhaps her morning chores, dreaming of her future with Joseph, when it happened. An angel, Gabriel no less, stood before her. He calls her "favored one." What could he possibly mean by that? He then explained God's favor was on her because she would conceive and give birth to a child who would be the promised Messiah. Like every Jewish teenager, Mary had heard all about the coming Messiah. "But me, his mother?" Then it hit her: "I've never even known a man; how can this be?" It wasn't an expression of doubt, but of confusion. Perhaps the angel meant this would take place **after** she and Joseph were married.

Then came the shocker: the Holy Spirit would do the impossible in her womb. But what would people think? What about Joseph? She might lose him. All her dreams were dying. There had to be a battle going on within her. Part of her wanted to fall down in praise; another part wanted to protest such an intrusion into

her life. But, amid that internal battle, Mary made a decision: ***"Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word."*** In simple faith Mary said yes to God; she surrendered to God's plan.

Visit to Elizabeth

Soon, Mary is packing her bags and leaving town. The angel said something about her older cousin Elizabeth also experiencing a miracle; she was pregnant in her old age. Perhaps she'd understand. So Mary headed south for the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth lived with her husband, Zacharias.

Picture Mary here, a pregnant teenage runaway. It was a four day walk to Elizabeth's house; she had plenty of time to think about how to explain this to her. She probably had a little speech planned as she arrived, but before she could say a word Elizabeth broke out in a song: ***"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."*** She even called Mary ***"the mother of my Lord."*** A huge weight must have fallen from Mary's shoulders and Mary herself broke out in song. We call it "the Magnificat." It's a song of praise and thanksgiving. The theme of the song is God's great reversal of fortune for both the humble and the proud. God exalts the humble. He has had regard for her ***"humble state."*** She calls him ***"God my Savior."*** Future generations will call her ***"blessed."*** At the same time, ***"He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart and brought down rulers from their thrones."***

Birth of Jesus

Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth. She returned to Nazareth just before Elizabeth gave birth. Perhaps she was starting to show and didn't want to cause Elizabeth any trouble. She knew the birth of John would be surrounded with many friends and relatives wishing Elizabeth well. So she went back to Nazareth. Time to face the music.

Going back had to be rough. What would her parents say? We rarely think about Jesus' grandparents. Did they respond like any parent would, with an outburst of anger and moral lectures? What about Joseph? What would he do? Mary had no one to defend her. But this is where God steps in. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit, and to take her as his wife. And that's what he did. Then came the months of silence when Mary's belly grew large and her face red; the people of Nazareth may have been unlettered

people but they could count. Small towns are notoriously cruel on those who break the rules.

So when Caesar Augustus called for everyone to return to their hometown for a census, Joseph and Mary might have been glad to move to Bethlehem. The idea would be to stay with relatives, but being aware of Mary's condition, they didn't have any room in their house, at least not for them. So Mary and Joseph were forced to find shelter in a cave used as a stable for farm animals.

I heard a funny story about a little boy who was to play the part of the innkeeper in the Christmas play. When it came time to tell Joseph there was no room and they had to sleep in the stable, it just seemed so cruel that he couldn't do it. So, instead, he said, "There's no room, but would you like to come in for a drink?"

Mary and Joseph didn't have it quite so good. They went straight to the stable. Don't be fooled; this wasn't a pretty sight! As they entered the cave, they were knocked off their feet with the pungent smell of urine. We imagine Mary on a soft bed of hay; they had no hay in Palestine. Mary was sprawled out on a bed of manure. Does that shock you? God makes his entrance into the world in the most humiliating way possible. Mary had no midwife, and Joseph wasn't much of a birth coach. Finally, with one last screaming push, the baby was out; the Messiah has arrived; God's been born. "Way to go, Mary. Hey, where do we put him? Here, how about this feed box; yea, that will work." "Be sure to wrap him up, Joseph, he looks kind of cold." It's amazing to think the birth of Christ was attended by more animals than people! What a contrast to the birth of John, which Luke records a few verses earlier. Elizabeth had midwives, doting relatives, and the traditional village chorus celebrating the birth of a male Jew. Mary had none of that.

Visit by shepherds

Of course, there were a few shepherds. You know the story. But this only adds to the absurdity of it all. Shepherds were considered the riffraff of Palestine. They were banned from the Temple. After their famous "angel sighting" they ran off to find the baby. Imagine them walking in on Mary and Joseph and wanting to have a peek at baby Jesus. How would you react if a band of wandering derelicts entered your hospital room with the hot smell of whiskey on their breath, asking to hold your baby? But no doubt they told her what the angel said, *"I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*

Mary's response

When Mary heard that, how did she respond? Luke carefully records the response in verses 18–19. *"And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."* When he says they all "wondered" he uses a word that means "to

be amazed." It's the same word used over in v.33 when after they heard Simeon's prophecy about the child it says, *"his mother and father were amazed at the things being said about him."* The idea behind this word is to see or hear something that takes your breath away. It's startling. It's marvelous. It's impressive.

Notice it says *"all who heard it wondered."* Who is he referring to? As far as we can tell the only people in the cave besides the shepherds were Mary and Joseph. Perhaps this includes all the people the shepherds told later (see v.20). So all who heard it were impressed, but notice v.19 starts with the word, "But..." That's a word of contrast. It's like he's saying, *"But Mary* (in contrast to all the others) *treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."* Everyone was excited and amazed over what the angel had said, but Mary took it a step further. She *"treasured all these things"* and as she was doing that she *"pondered them in her heart."* The idea behind both words is to think deeply about something; to give careful consideration to what it means; to turn it over in your mind; to chew on it until every ounce of it is digested. Luke intentionally uses a verb tense that communicates ongoing action. She kept on doing this. It strikes me we might be amazed and impressed by Jesus and his birth; there's a lot of excitement about it, that's not a bad thing. But how many of us take it a step further and contemplate what it really means?

To truly appreciate the birth of Jesus we need to cultivate a spirit of contemplation.

Joseph, the forgotten man of Christmas, is outstanding for his obedience; his outward actions. But Mary is outstanding for something else; something inward; something she held deep within. In a translation called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates v.19 like this, *"Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself."* In some ways she's a stark contrast to the shepherds. Verse 20 says the shepherds were running around, praising God, telling everyone within earshot what they had seen and heard. That's what you do when you're amazed. But Mary doesn't tell a soul; Mary just holds it in; keeps it in her heart. It's not the last time Luke says this of Mary. Later in v.51 after the visit to Jerusalem where they found 12-year-old Jesus in the temple debating the scholars he says again, *"His mother treasured all these things in her heart."* Mary is the contemplative soul of Christmas.

I want to suggest this morning to truly appreciate Christmas we need to be more like Mary. We do not need to do **more** but **less**. I want to suggest before you **do** anything, you take time to treasure and ponder the miracle of God wrapping himself in flesh, becoming a tiny, helpless infant, who would grow up and offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins. One of the things that keeps us from truly treasuring this as Mary did is we think we already have it all figured out. We think, "I get all that. I understand it. It all makes sense to me." You know, "God says it. I believe it. That

settles it." Maybe you became a Christian a long time ago. You've been celebrating Christmas your whole life and have it all nailed down. The birth of Jesus. The incarnation. His mission to save us from our sins. There's a danger in that. Can we ever really get it nailed down?

Recently nearly 3,000 researchers did a Census of Marine Life. These are expert scientists. They know their field, but in the process of doing the census they discovered 6,000 new species, bringing the total number of known marine species to 250,000. They discovered 600-year-old tube worms, herring that swim in formations as large as Manhattan, the "yeti crab" which features long downy claws like fur mittens, a jellyfish with a Darth Vader-like helmet, and another jellyfish that uses "lights" to "scream" for help. The scientists who worked on the project were constantly surprised—and even stunned—by the diversity, abundance and beauty of what they found. One of the vice-chairs for the project said, "Life astonished us everywhere we looked ...The most surprising thing was the beauty ...Our eyes pumped out of our heads in front of this beauty." The researchers also cautioned that at least 20% of the ocean's volume has yet to be explored. One researcher confessed even after ten years of hard work, they still only have "snapshots" of the diversity and beauty of creation under the sea.

It seems to me if expert scientists are stunned by what they're discovering and humbled by what they've yet to discover about marine life, we should be every bit as stunned by what we're discovering about our Savior and humbled by the depths of what we don't yet know. As soon as we think we have it all figured out and nailed down, all the wonder is gone and we stop searching for more.

Perhaps this is why God didn't reveal himself to the religious leaders. Instead he revealed himself to people like Mary, Joseph and shepherds. The fundamental mistake the religious leaders made was trying to force God to fit in their religious boxes. Instead of being conformed to God's image, they tried to recreate God in their image. They had "god in a box" so when Jesus showed up and didn't fit into their categories they were threatened and killed him. He didn't fit in their box. That's the danger of religion. We think we have it all nailed down and we miss God in the process.

In his book *Rumors*, Philip Yancey says there are two ways of looking at the world: "One takes the world apart, while the other seeks to connect and put it together." He goes on to say, "We live in an age that excels at the first and falters at the second." In the same way, there are two ways to approach God. One approach takes God apart; call it a theology of dissection. We make God manageable and measurable. We reduce God to a set of propositions or seal tight formulas. In the words of A.W. Tozer, we end up with a God who can "never surprise us, never overwhelm us,

never astonish us, never transcend us." Mary didn't fall into that trap.

The religious leaders could quote scripture until they were blue in the face, but they missed the whole point. Jesus once said to them, "*You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life*" (Jn 5:39-40). They missed the forest through the trees. They thought they had God pigeonholed so when he showed up and didn't fit into their nice, neat categories they didn't recognize him.

In contrast to the theology of dissection, consider Isaiah 55:8. The Lord says, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" Astronomers have discovered galaxies 13.2 billion light years away. That means it takes light, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, more than twelve billion years to reach the outer edges of the universe. God says that's about the distance between his thoughts and your thoughts. We underestimate God by 13.2 billion light years. Psalm 145:3 says, "*There are no boundaries to His greatness; His greatness no one can fathom.*"

We need to have a healthy respect for mystery when it comes to God. One Greek Orthodox theologian says: "God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder." Chrysostom, who lived in the 4th century, said children exhibit an innate sensitivity to mystery, which he applied to the Christmas story: "Tell a child the story of Bethlehem, the vigil of the shepherds, the quest of the Magi, the song of the angels and the babe in the manger. He drinks it all in. An adult, similarly situated, opens a discussion on what he is pleased to call the doctrine of the Incarnation. Tell a child the story of the cross; he accepts it avidly, finding no difficulty anywhere. Relate to an adult the same impressive facts, and he'll ask learnedly for a theory of the Atonement."

If we're going to cultivate a spirit of contemplation like Mary we'll have to slow down long enough to do it. You can't rush this. You can't put it on a to do list and check it off when you've put in your 15 minutes. Jesus understood that. Here in Luke's gospel it says this of Jesus: "*The news about Him was spreading even farther, and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses.*" You can see Jesus had so much to do; so many needs to meet. How did he handle this? In the next breath, Luke says, "*But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray*" (Lk 5:39-40). Jesus intentionally carved out time to be alone; to pray; to ponder. He didn't wait until it was convenient. People were waiting in line. There were needs to be met, but he withdrew. From Joseph he learned obedience, but this? This contemplative spirit? He learned this from Mary.

What keeps us from responding like Mary? The biggest obstacle may just be we're too busy. Too many other things to do—good things. We're doing good just to get to church once a week. But the reality is we make time for what's most important. We have the time, it's just being used for other things. Maybe the one gift we can give Jesus this Christmas is say "no" to some good things in order to do what Jesus once called "the one thing necessary."

Conclusion

J.B. Phillips wrote a story about a senior angel showing a very young angel around the splendors of the universe. They see whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they run across one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a rather small and insignificant sphere turning slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel. "What's so special about that one?"

Then he listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel said that this planet, small and dirty as it was, was the renowned Visited Planet.

"Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince went down in person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why do a thing like that?"

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust. "Do you mean to tell me that he stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures on that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think he would like you calling them 'creeping crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond comprehension.

It **is** beyond comprehension. But it's not beyond contemplation. Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It's the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed." My prayer is that through Spirit-led contemplation you can re-experience the stunning mystery of Christmas—the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God of all Creation was born as a helpless little baby in Bethlehem.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.