

December 22, 2019

The Trouble With Christmas: Troubled Mother

Luke 1:26-56

This morning we continue our Advent series: The Trouble with Christmas. And that may seem like an odd title for an Advent sermon series because we want to think of Christmas with joy, and hope and good news, and warm fuzzy feelings which yes are all true and part of the Christmas story.

But before we get to the good news we need to acknowledge and confront the not so great news and the trouble with Christmas. The trouble with Christmas is the humbling reality of why Jesus had to come and be born in the first place. To save us from our sins.

It was because of our sin and our turning away and rebellion against God that left us helplessly, hopelessly lost and separated from God and unable to do anything about it. We were in desperate need of a savior.

So the trouble with Christmas is what the story is all about. The story of a willing savior born to rescue unwilling people from sin and themselves because there was no other way.

And when we realize this and accept the trouble with Christmas can we truly hear and be excited about the most wonderful and great news and joy of Christmas. Because good news is really only good news to those who need to hear good news. And we need to hear good news.

The good news that God wasn't willing to leave us in a tragic and desperate broken state. And out of His radical, risky and redemptive love He stepped down in our world as God with us to rescue us who could not help themselves. It was God's greatest gift to us. Not as something we deserved or for us to earn but for us to receive.

As John 3:16-17 reminds us of this good news. The story behind the story.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

At the start of Advent this year I was reflecting on and thinking about the trouble with Christmas. And realizing I had lost some of the awe and wonder at the greatest true story ever told, and I believe the trouble with Christmas for me was I had become too familiar with the story.

And while I believe being familiar with the story of Christmas and God's grace is a good thing as we need to be reminded of God's greatest gift and the extent of His love and grace for us that He would willingly step down into our world to save us.

I had crossed over to the dark side of familiar.

Paul Tripp warns about this in the Advent devotional Tina and I have been going through this year called “Come, Let Us Adore Him.”

Often when we become familiar with things, we quit noticing them. When we are familiar with things, we tend not to celebrate them as we once did. Familiarity tends to rob us of our wonder. And here’s what’s important about this: what has captured the wonder of our hearts will control the way we live.

Maybe some of you relate to that. As I thought about it, I realized this happens in my life more often than I would like to admit. For example, when we first moved to Grand Junction I was captivated by the wonder of the beauty of this area. Especially the monument. I would run all the different trails and just be in a constant state of awe and wonder at the beauty of God’s creation

But over time and running the same trails over and over it became familiar that it lost some of its excitement and wonder. When this happens, I need to remind myself to step back, pause, be still and see again the wonder and awe of God’s creation and the privilege and joy it is to run and be close to the mountains.

So as we continue this morning in the Christmas story and as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus in a few days allow God’s love and the most amazing true story ever to capture the wonder of your hearts.

This morning we read the story of Mary. A young woman who is troubled by the words of an unexpected visitor. Everything about this story, this real true amazing story, and Mary’s response to God’s calling is filled with awe and wonder.

And I wonder...

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

I wonder...

Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

And I wonder...

Mary Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? That This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.

Sounds like the beginnings of a good song☺ Now you all will be wondering why you have the song stuck in your head all day. Your welcome.

And while there may be many things we wonder if Mary actually knew. I want to look at and talk about what Mary did know. I believe it’s what Mary did know. About God, about His Love, and His redemptive plan that allowed her to respond to His calling in the way that she did.

So, Mary, what did you know? We know that you know what the angel Gabriel told you. That the Lord is with you and you have His favor. That you will conceive as a virgin, by the Holy Spirit and that you will bear a son, to be named Jesus.

And Mary you know, that this child will be no ordinary child. He will be called the Son of God, born in human flesh. And He will be great, He will Holy. And you know that this boy will be the messianic king coming out of the line of David and His kingdom will be forever and ever. All of this Mary knew as this is what the angel told her.

The question is, does she believe it? There is a difference in just knowing something and actually believing it. But we see that Mary knew and believed... We know she believes by the way she responds. Boldly by faith she says:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (NRSV)

“I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” (NLT)

And more than just what she knew from what was told to her by the Angel, I believe Mary knew and believed some deeper truths about God and His grace, and love.

This morning I want to explore four things that Mary did know that allowed her to step out in faith and respond to God’s risky calling on her life.

In our passage from Luke 1 we read twice that Mary was favored by God. What does it mean to be favored by God? I know I have my favorites. My favorite food- tacos. My favorite song- Mary did you know? My favorite trails. And my favorite child. Just kidding.

But those are not the same thing as having God’s favor. God’s favor is God’s “grace”. It is the unmerited favor of God. It is God giving us the ability to do something which is humanly impossible for us to do. Just as the angel declared in verse 3- “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

It is that same favor that same saving grace that Paul reminds us of in Ephesians 2:8-9.

For by grace (God’s favor, God’s grace) we have been saved through faith, and that not of ourselves it is the gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast.

The first thing I believe Mary knew had to do with what the favor of God meant which is why I think she responded the way she did to Gabriel.

Isn’t it interesting that when Gabriel appears, she didn’t freak out like Zachariah by the sudden appearance of an angel? Instead it says she was troubled or perplexed by what Gabriel said. By his words?

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

The NIV translation says, “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.”

It reminds me of how I sometimes approach my wife when I want something. “ Darling sweetie, most humble and beautiful wife. The blessed mother of my children.” Like Mary, Tina is troubled and wondering what kind of greeting this is.

Mary knew something unique and extraordinary was happening. Mary knew the weight of the word "favor" and, as anyone who truly is humble in spirit, I imagine Mary is wondering how in the world she falls into that category. "Who am I that God would choose me?"

Mary knew God's favor wasn't because she did or her accomplishments, but God had called and chosen her as the vessel to demonstrate the outpouring of His Grace.

And most definitely this was an extraordinary outpouring of God's grace and face. Certainly bearing and raising the Son of God was an incredible beyond understating favor of God but I it is important for us to be reminded that the way God favored her is the same way he favors you and me and all his children.

That as the line in the song says, the child she delivered would soon deliver her. And it is that same favor- the salvation from our sin, God's grace He has given to everyone who believes in him.

While Mary may have not known or understood the full extent of what God's favor meant for her and for the world, she did know that this instance of God's favor would mean the unfavor of others.

Mary knew that a pregnancy like this would bring in unfavor from her community, from Joseph, her parents. Mary knew Getting pregnant before her wedding was a major scandal.

Mary knew that her reputation, her status, her wedding and even potentially her life were all at risk. Mary knew God was at work doing something big, but it came with great trouble and risk.

And while God's favor isn't always easy, it's always good and it brings us a hope in God's promises and an assurance that His presence will always be with us.

Which is the second thing I want to point out that Mary knew. Mary knew that God was with her.

Mary knew that God was with her and would be with her. The Holy Spirit will be upon her and she would be carrying the Son of God and God will overshadow her.

Mary also knew the story of her people, God's people, and the way God took care of his people. How God delivered His people. Maybe she recalls God's word from the prophet Isaiah.

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.(Isaiah 41:10)

While Mary knew her situation was risky and troubling, she also worshipped and knew God was faithful to His promises. She knew God who cared for his people in the face of difficult

circumstances. She knew God's promises of his presence in times of trouble. Mary worshipped this God by grace could say "yes" with great confidence and comfort in knowing God was with her.

I think about in my own life when there are times when sense God is prompting me or calling me to something difficult, risky, to find trouble and while I know (in my mind) the promise that God who will never leave me or forsake me I struggle with believing in my heart. While I know that God will equip me to do His good work, I struggle with actually believing it at times. Unlike Mary who humbly responds "yes", I tend to initially respond with doubt and question.

"But God you don't know how complicated this is going to be for me?" Sounds risky God? What will others think? Can't I just pray about it a bit more? God, can I get back to you?

Mary knew and believed that God was with her and that God would give her all that she needed in this calling.

And after all this. After her saying yes to God and after seeing the impossible made possible in the pregnant Elizabeth Mary worships and praises God.

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

"From now on all generations will call me blessed"

When it comes to being blessed we often understand blessing and a blessed life to be smooth sailing and a trouble free. #blessed. "Too blessed too stress."

But I believe Mary seemed to grasp and know a deeper meaning of blessed. Especially in the immediate circumstances she was in.

A third thing knew was Mary knew what it meant to be blessed

To be blessed by God does not mean that things will be easy, that we'll get what we want, or that life will be smooth. We certainly see this in Mary's life.

As Mary demonstrates, to be blessed by God means to be in a place where God can use us for His purpose in the world, where we can be an instrument of His redemptive plan bringing God's saving, loving, grace-filled, hopeful, peaceful, presence to places and people who so desperately need it.

Being blessed by God does not always feel like blessing. Mary experienced this as the news spread around town that she was pregnant. I imagine it didn't feel like blessing for Mary when

she and Joseph had to flee their country. Or it probably didn't feel like a blessing as she worried over her missing twelve-year old son.

And truly it didn't feel like blessing as she watched her son Jesus handed over to be crucified and die.

Being blessed by God means knowing and believing God has a much bigger plan than we can imagine. And that God is working and moving bringing light into darkness and life into death. Being blessed is believing God's story. That the end is never really the end. It is always life, always hope, always resurrection. That is what Mary knew blessing to be.

Mary also knew that she was blessed. Not because of who she was, but because of who God is, and because of what God was doing through her. Mary knew, and it gave her the courage to trust and step forward boldly.

Lastly, I believe one of the most important things Mary knew was hope. She knew the thrill of hope and where true hope was found. That God is hope!

In her prophetic hymn we see this hope manifested.

*His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

Mary knew hope, and this hope enabled her to proclaim the work of the Lord as already a done deal. Past tense.

Hope is part of who we are. Because we are made in God's image we are hardwired for hope. We can't help but hope. But we often realize the many things we put our hopes in end up failing us or leave us feeling let down We says things like I don't want to get my hopes up" because we are afraid of being disappointed?

I believe our problem is not with hope but what we put our hopes in. Hope in God never disappoints. Paul reminds us of this in Romans.

Hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

I love what Max Lucado says about hope:

"Hope is not what you'd expect; it is what you would never dream. It is a wild, improbable tale with a pinch-me-I'm-dreaming ending... Hope is not a granted wish or a favor performed; no, it is far greater than that. It is a zany, unpredictable dependence on a God who loves to surprise us out of our socks and be there in the flesh to see our reaction."

Mary knew the thrill of hope the true hope found in God our savior.

So what about us? What do we know? Do we know what Mary knew? From where we stand, we actually know more than Mary knew. We know how the story played out. We know that just as God promised, Jesus came and was born. We know that God was with her. We know Mary was the blessed mother of Jesus. And we know just as he came once, Jesus will come back again. We know how the story worked out. We know more than Mary knew at the time and yet we hesitate to respond as she did: "Here I am Lord, I am your servant.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our savior and as we reflect on Christmas and ponder our own reactions to how God is working in our lives, and in this world let us not forget the example and faith of this young woman whose response to God was an unqualified "Here I am, May it be."

May we too be filled with such hope and courage. The courage to know that we do not have to be afraid, that God is with Us, that we have received His favor and the gift of His grace through Jesus Christ.