

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,  
December 18, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

### **LUKE 1:26-56**

28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

### **WHEN HOPE WAS BORN #3** **WHAT MARY TEACHES US ABOUT HOPE**

She was most likely thirteen or fourteen years old when she received a most unusual visitor in her parent's Nazareth home. Nazareth wasn't the ideal place for a young woman to grow up. In first Century Israel, Nazareth was considered a wicked town. It was a famous stopover for garrisons of Roman soldiers, where a soldier could find plenty of women willing to sleep with them if the price was right. Nazareth's reputation was so bad that by the time Jesus walked the earth people wondered if anything good could come out of the town. That in itself is almost unimaginable considering the high regard with which the world holds Mary, the Mother of Jesus today.

To Roman Catholics she is the woman who was born by Immaculate Conception, who was born without original sin, who remained a virgin her entire life, and who lived a sinless life. We Protestants don't believe those things about Mary. Jesus was unique in his virgin birth. Mary and Joseph had other children, so she didn't remain a virgin after her marriage. She definitely sinned. Only God is without sin. But, there was something special about her. Mary cannot answer our prayer or intercede on our behalf, but she can serve as a beautiful example of faithful service to God, and like everything that we have been learning this Advent season, she can teach us about hope. Mary was a faithful follower of God, who held a special and an honored place among women.

#### **Mary's Purity – vs. 26-28**

Let's look at her story as recorded in Luke 1:26-56. The first thing we will notice about Mary is her purity. Look at these verses with me:

26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

A couple weeks ago I mentioned to you that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ has been one of the most contested doctrines of the Christian faith. After all, none of us have ever met a person who was born of a virgin. It's a preposterous idea. Everyone knows that it takes a male and a female to produce a child.

But, no fewer than two times in these first three verses that introduce us to a woman named Mary do we read about the fact that she was a virgin. She was sexually pure.

Luke, the Gospel writer who was also a physician wanted us to be aware of the fact that Mary was a woman who had never been with a man. I'm sure Luke was well aware of the fact that certain readers of his Gospel would raise eyebrows at his inclusion of the virginity of Mary in his Gospel. But, they would have no doubt recognized the significance of the statement.

For thousands of years the people of Israel had awaited their Messiah. Isaiah 7:14 prophesied His coming with these words: 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

You'll remember from the sermon on prophecy two weeks ago that one translation of the Bible even changed the wording of Isaiah 7:14 to say that a "young woman" would be with child, instead of a "virgin" would be with child. Mary was pure. And, based upon everything else that we read about Mary, this was not just a physical purity, but a spiritual purity. She was pure of heart. That doesn't mean that she was without sin, but it means that she was pursuing God and His righteousness. Remember our series on the Sermon on the Mount? One of the prerequisites to us being seen as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven is that we are pure in heart. In Matthew 5:8 we read, "8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Remember, when Jesus says blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God, He is saying, "they and they only will see God."

Mary was someone with a pure heart. How about you? This Christmas season what is it that your heart is pursuing? Is Jesus Christ your priority? In Matthew 6:19-21 we read:

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A few verses later in verse 33, we read: 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

I believe that this is the type of person that Mary was. Even as a teenager in a wicked city, she was pursuing Jehovah. She was seeking to live a pure life. Our actions; where we spend our time, how we invest our finances, who we spend our time with, how much we invest in others, etc. say so much about us. How we view our treasure, how we use our talents, how we share our testimony and how we use our body says much about the condition of our heart.

Jesus said in Luke 6:45, "45 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."

What is your life showing about the condition of your heart?

**Mary's Faith – vs. 29-37**

Mary's story continues in verse 29, where we begin to get a glimpse of Mary's Faith.

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 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, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

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

35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing is impossible with God."

What a scene!

I think that many would have thought about what the angel was saying and that their initial response would have been one of skepticism. That doesn't seem at all to be the approach that Mary took. She is troubled by the angel's greeting. I imagine anyone of us would have been troubled too! It's not every day that an angel visits your home. And, she must have had to get her bearings. Was she dreaming? Was this angel good or bad? What about this news the angel was bringing? She had to be full of questions. In fact, the very first words that Luke records Mary saying are words that make up a question. Even her question gives us a glimpse into Mary's faith. She doesn't tell the angel to get out. She doesn't question the validity of the angel's message. She accepts it by faith, asking the question anyone of us would have. She essentially asks, "How is this going happen? After all, I'm a virgin."

The angel responds by giving her the details of the pregnancy, tells her about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, and then says something that is important for all of us to hear as it relates to faith. Did you catch the words of verse 37?

37 For nothing is impossible with God.

Do you believe that? It's one of the key messages that we should learn this Christmas season. In fact, it's one of the great gifts that we have in God. We serve a God who does the impossible. And, in our cerebral, intellectual, twenty-first Century world where we have seen advancements in science and technology that our forefathers would have called miracles, we have trouble believing in the miracle working God of Scripture. Mary's faith trusted in God to do the impossible. Do you?

Did you know there is a direct correlation between faith and hope? Mary's faith teaches us about hope. It shows us that hope can grow when we place our faith in the right place.

Hebrews 11:1 says, “1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Can you believe in a God who created the world with His very breath, who healed lepers, who gave the blind sight, who raised the dead, who cast out demons, who brought peace where there was no peace and brought light where there was darkness? Perhaps the greatest miracle that our God does is that He brings life to souls that have been dead. He brings forgiveness for sin. In Isaiah 1:18 we read:

18 “Come now, let us reason together,”  
 says the LORD.  
 “Though your sins are like scarlet,  
 they shall be as white as snow;  
 though they are red as crimson,  
 they shall be like wool.

There is nothing like the purity of a fresh blanket of snow. Here in Minnesota, where we are used to white Christmases there is a lot of doubt as to whether or not we will experience a white Christmas this year. We are still waiting for our first big snowfall of the season. When it comes, and be sure, it will come, take some time to reflect on Isaiah 1:18. That picture of white snow is a great picture of what God does with our hearts when we confess our sin. He purifies us. And that is a beautiful picture of the impossible thing that only God can make possible. Mary believed in the power of her Son Jesus to forgive people from their sins, because she was a woman of faith. She took God at His word. But, she wasn't just a woman of faith, she was a woman of faithful obedience.

Look at verse 38.

### **Mary's Faithful Obedience**

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Would you have responded that way? Remember Mary is most likely thirteen or fourteen years old when she receives this news.

The teenage girl responds with such faithful, humble obedience.

In his sermon entitled *Misunderstanding Mary*, Brian Bill said the following:

“We know at least four things about Mary. She is a teenager, she is poor, she is a devout believer in God, and she is very much in love. When the story opens Mary is pledged or engaged to Joseph. Between the pledge and the wedding feast was a period usually lasting six months to a year. During that period the couple was considered to be married and were called husband and wife but they did not live together or have marital

relations.

Like brides-to-be everywhere, she can hardly think of anything but their wedding – the guest list, the decorations, the food, the music, and her dress. Mary had never been happier. This was the most exciting time of her life.

It's right at this point that God enters the scene. He is about to ask an unknown teenage girl to take part in something that is so shocking that it's almost unbelievable. What God asks Mary to do will change her life – and the course of history forever.

Gone are the happy dreams of a beautiful wedding; gone are the days of sweet anticipation; gone are the carefully thought out plans for the wedding feast. She will be married, but not before rumors spread through the countryside. There will be a wedding feast, but not the way she planned. It will all happen, but not the way she expected."<sup>1</sup>

Mary's childlike faith which expresses, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said," in verse 38 is an excellent example of faithful and humble obedience for all of us to follow as we seek to honor Christ with our lives.

So how are you doing when it comes to obedience? When I was in Russia several years ago, Vernon Brewer the President of World Help preached a sermon at the Zelenograd Baptist Church that I will never forget. He was teaching about obedience and he said, "God isn't looking for 50% obedience. He isn't looking for 75% obedience. He isn't looking for 99% obedience. God demands 100% obedience. Anything less is disobedience." I think Vernon was borrowing from early church father Thomas a Kampis who said, "Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is; delayed obedience is disobedience. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from Grace." Mary was a 100% obedience person when it came to submitting herself to God's will in this story. She obeyed instantly with faithful obedience. It's something that she showed throughout her life.

Peter Forsythe said, "The first duty of every soul is to find not its freedom but its Master."<sup>2</sup> Is God the Master of your soul?

### **Mary's Blessing – vs. 39-45**

In verses 39-45 we see Mary's Blessing. Three times in these verses the word, "Blessed," appears. If you are not opposed to writing in your Bibles, circle the word, "Blessed," each time you see it appear. There were many living in Mary's day that would have seen her as anything but blessed. Matthew's parallel Gospel talks about the doubt that Mary's fiancé Joseph was having concerning Mary's announcement of pregnancy.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Bill, *Misunderstanding Jesus*, a sermon preached at Pontiac Bible Church, Pontiac, MI in December, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Integrity Crisis*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 22.

There were no doubt scoffers in her village. But, Mary trusted God, and she was blessed, as revealed by her cousin Elizabeth.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

What a beautiful exchange between cousins. Mary's cousin Elizabeth was experiencing a miracle in and of itself. She, an old woman, was pregnant with John the Baptist. She was experiencing a blessing that she and her husband hadn't even dreamt would be possible at their age. But, when she saw Mary, she repeatedly told her that she was blessed, and blessed was the child she would bear. Mary was blessed because of Jesus, and you and I are blessed because of Him too. When you think about all that God has blessed you with this Christmas, I hope you'll remember that your greatest blessing is Jesus!

### **Mary's Heart of Devotion and Worship – vs. 46-55**

After Elizabeth pronounced Mary's blessing, Mary broke out in song! I would have loved to hear her sing the song. It's been called the Magnificat over the years because of the way that the Latin translates the first word of the song. Most of our English translations of Scripture have a heading above these words that simply reads, "Mary's Song."

There are some incredibly deep theological truths about God that the song explores. As we read these words keep in mind that Mary just a teenager when she says these words. Mary had a deep walk with God that is shown throughout this song where she quotes many Old Testament passages that speak of who God is. Listen to her words:

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.  
 53 He has filled the hungry with good things  
 but has sent the rich away empty.  
 54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
 remembering to be merciful  
 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
 even as he said to our fathers."

Mary recognized that her salvation came from God. She needed a Savior, just like you and just like me. Look at the words that she uses here. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . the Mighty One has done great things for me . . . His mercy extends to those who fear him. Mary was not a sinless woman. She needed the mercy that only God could offer. And, friends, it would do us good to recognize the mercy that God has shown to us as well. On this Sunday before Christmas may we remember just how blessed we are if we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And, may we remember that it is God who is our Savior.

In 2008, just a week or so before Christmas, USA Today printed an article that revealed that the majority of people who identified themselves as Christians in America believe that there is more than one way to heaven. That tells me that the majority of "Christians" have missed the true meaning of Christmas. If there really is more than one way to heaven, there would be no need for Jesus. There would be no need for Him to come as a baby, God in the flesh, so that we might be forgiven. There would be no need for Jesus to suffer death on the cross. There would be no need for Him to become sin so that we who are stained with sin could be made white as snow. There would be no need for Jesus. "Pick another path! It will get you there." But, you'd be wrong. Don't believe the lie. Jesus said it over and over again. He is the way, the truth and the life, no man or woman or boy or girl can go to heaven apart from Him. Mary understood this. She sang of her need for God, her Savior.

Mary's song came some time after the angelic pronouncement of Jesus' birth. Mary had gone from Nazareth to spend three months with her cousin, Elizabeth. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is in Luke 2:19, after the shepherds visit Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in the stable. That verse says, "19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

She had been thinking about what was happening to her. Maybe forty weeks seemed like a lifetime to the teenager soon-to-be-mother. Maybe it seemed quick. But as the days turned to weeks, and the weeks turned to months, and the arrival of Jesus was drawing near, Mary must have wondered, "Why me?" Perhaps she remembered that God loves to use the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. He loves to find value in that which the world despises. He loves to turn the world's system upside down. He's the Messiah who would rather serve and give his life for others, than to live in a palace with servants meeting His every whim. He's the Savior whose first night on earth was spent in a barn instead of a palace. He's the God who demands payment for sin, but chooses to pay the price Himself. He's the gift giver who knows that even

though the gift He offers is better than anything the world can offer that He will be stood up time and time again by people who think they don't need Him. He's the loving God who won't force others to love him.

One of our greatest hopes as Christians is that we will someday see God. Jesus told us that can only happen if hearts are pure. I've got great news for you. Your heart can be pure today. There is not a single person who has ever lived who has a pure heart, which means that we are all sunk. God knew that. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they and they only will see God," He knew that we would need Him to make our hearts pure. That's why Jesus came as God in the flesh. He came to do what we couldn't. He came to make the hearts of mankind pure. But we need to accept the forgiveness and grace that can only come through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

If you have never trusted Christ as your Savior today, why not do what Mary did? Mary, the Mother of Jesus had faith that her Son truly was the Son of God. She was there at the cross when He died for your sins and mine, and yes, for Mary's too. Mary needed the grace of the Savior, because she, like you and me was a sinner in need of God's grace. She was made pure because of God's work for her through His Son, Jesus Christ. Mary teaches us that even a person from the wrong side of the tracks can live a righteous life and be rescued by the God of the universe. He chose her to carry His son, not because she was perfect, but because she was pursuing Him, was faithful, full of devotion and faith and love for God walking in humble obedience. May Mary's example be a template for you to follow the Christmas season and throughout your life!