

I. Set Up

A. Today's Advent message focuses on Mary – the Mother of Jesus, the First Disciple, and a person whose response to God's call is an example to us all. Mike will be preaching from Luke 1. Let me pray.

II. Introduction

A. We've been doing something almost unAmerican recently, we are slow walking through December. Rather than racing to Christmas – rather than leaning into the happy, festive, positive, family-food-presents-office-party focused holiday we've come to know. We are doing Advent. We are working on waiting. We are sitting in the dark so that – later on – we will more fully appreciate the light.

B. And one of the goals during this time is to learn from the ways others have waited - how others have managed life's challenges. We started with Abraham. Last week it was Joseph. Today it's Mary, and our text is Luke 1.

III. Luke 1:26-38

A. **In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy** (Elizabeth is John the Baptist's mother. She is a Mary's Aunt. She is an older woman who was unable to have children and is now well past child-bearing age. Who is now supernaturally pregnant with the "Elijah figure." In the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament, the last promise made was that the next thing to happen in the grand arc of God's plan was that Elijah would return to announce the arrival of the Messiah. John the Baptist is the Elijah figure. When the angel Gabriel had visited Zechariah – Elizabeth's husband – he had told him that his prayers (which he stopped praying 20 years ago) were about to be answered. His wife was going to conceive and give birth to the one (Luke 1:17) who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah). **In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."** So, 6th months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, the same angel that had visited Zechariah telling him that Elizabeth was going to have a baby, tells Mary – who has not slept with a man - that she is about to discover that she is pregnant.

B. **Mary was greatly troubled at his words** (Messenger angels tend to overwhelm those they visit) **and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."**

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

D. The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.” (That’s a line you might want to underline).

E. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

IV. This passage covers what we refer to as “The Annunciation.”

A. Which is a dressed up way of saying, “it reports on the announcement that was made to Mary, telling her – this young, virtuous teenage girl - that she has been selected by God to give birth to the Savior of the World.

B. It’s celebrated on March 25th, which is nine months before December 25.¹

C. It’s worth noting that Nazareth was a small village well off the beaten path – the kind of place where you’d stop to buy gas and a Coke and look around and wonder, “What do people do here?”

1. Today it’s a city of a couple hundred thousand, and one of the landmarks of it is the Church of the Annunciation

a) #1 –this is what it looks like on the outside.

b) #2 – this is what it looks like on the inside.

c) #3 – and this is what it looks like in the basement. There is a grotto, where many believe the angel appeared to Mary.

D. If you go to Israel, you realize:

1. That there are caves everywhere – and that homes were often built to include them because they were cool places in a hot climate.

2. A second thing you realize is that churches have been built on top of every spot that is believed to be important. You want to visit the place where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, wept for Jerusalem, was crucified, turned water into wine – whatever - what you visit is a church built on that spot.

3. And a third thing you realize is that it’s not always clear that the spot where the church is located is the exact spot. It was illegal to be a Christ-follower for most of the 300 yrs following his death, so no one erected a monument and built the museum until Constantine issued his edict of toleration in the early 4th century. So... who knows. Sometimes there are reasons to think – yes, this makes sense. Other times, who knows. But tradition holds that the Angel Gabriel came to Mary while she was at her home, and many believe this church marks the precise spot.

¹ March 25th (for the Day of Ascension) and Dec. 25th (for Christ’s birth) are not believed to be accurate. It is quite clear that December 25th was advanced as the day of Christ’s birthday as a way of leveraging the pagan celebrations in Rome that tied to the Winter Solstice.

E. One of the more profound, transcendent moments I ever had came while standing there. Yohanna Katanacho, who was a member here while he was doing his PhD at Trinity, now lives less than a mile from this site. He took me to it, and while he was explaining the history behind the location, said, “We don’t know if this is the exact spot. But we know that somewhere very close to here, God became a man.” It was a transcendent, God-moment for me that I will always remember. And so I have thought about this passage a fair bit.

V. As you may know, the Book of Luke was written by Luke to Theophilus to lay out an orderly account of things, and that as we are reading and interpreting the Bible, one of the things we need to do is read it through Theophilus’s eyes.

A. The first goal of Bible study is to understand “what the original writer intended the original reader to understand” To that end, I want to share five things I believe would have jumped off the page for Theophilus.

VI. Number One: The claim that Jesus was born to a Virgin.

A. Seven hundred years before Christ was born – before the *Logos* took on flesh, before the eternal Son of God became the Son of Man – the prophet Isaiah had announced that the Messiah would be born to a virgin. He wrote, **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (God with us).”**²

B. This was not the first mention of a virgin birth.³ That took place back in Gen 3 when God reported that He would send the “Seed of Woman” to defeat evil. But Isaiah’s comments were important. And the wording that is found in Luke 1 closely parallels what Isaiah had promised. At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel shows up to tell Mary that she was the one Isaiah had been speaking about. She was the virgin who would give birth to a son.

C. I am aware that some dismiss the virgin birth – or virgin conception, which is the real nature of the miracle – as nonsense.⁴ “Come on! Let’s grow up. Let’s stop acting like we don’t know where babies come from.” Well sure, we know where regular babies come from. The claim is that Jesus was not a regular baby. Every-one else’s life begins at conception. Jesus had existed as God – the *Logos* – from eternity past.

² The wording here is almost identical to the LXX version of Isaiah 7:14. (The LXX is the Greek translation of the Old Testament.)

³ There are actually two areas of confusion. The first is that the real miracle is the virgin conception. The second is that Protestants and Catholics use the term Virgin Mary in different ways. Roman Catholics have traditionally taken the term to refer to the “threefold virginity of Mary:” the virginal conception of Jesus without a human father; the virginal birth of Jesus without rupturing Mary’s hymen; and Mary’s perpetual virginity – i.e., the argument that she never had marital relations nor other children. Protestants use the term *Virgin Birth* to refer only to the virginal conception of Jesus, believing that speculation about Mary’s “perpetual virginity” are not only extra-biblical but contra-biblical (cf. Mt. 1:25; 13:55-56; Mk 3:31-32; 6:3; Jn 7:3-5; Acts 1:14; I Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19). Richard Longenecker, *Whose Child is This?* **Christianity Today**, Dec. 17, 1990, p. 27.

⁴ Some claim the word used here for virgin – *parthenos* – does not mean *virgin* but simply means *young girl*. There is one situation in the Old Testament where this is the case, but: 1) the most common meaning is *virgin*; 2) this is the

1. The incarnation is not the beginning of his life. The incarnation is when he added humanity to deity. It is when he became one of us, so that among other things he could represent us in death. He did this – he entered creation through a virgin’s womb – in order to avoid the sin nature you and I have.

2. Different sermon, but the claim is not that we are sinners because we sin. But that we sin because we are sinners. From the moment sin entered the world, there is a factory flaw. We are born broken. In order to avoid this, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit.

3. Understand, had Jesus been born a sinner, his blood could not cover my sins because it would be required for his own sins. The Virgin Birth is not a small matter. Dismiss it and everything begins to unravel.^{5 6}

D. Theophilus would know all of this. He would know that the plan was to unfold via one born of a virgin. So, when Luke writes that Jesus was born to a virgin, he would be thinking: OK, it’s game time.

VII. Two: Theophilus would have been shocked by how humiliating this all was.

A. The surprise would not be that God could arrange to send his Son into the world via a Virgin’s womb. If God is God – if He is the Almighty Creator – engineering a virginal conception is not a big deal.

B. The shock would be not be that He could enter the world this way. The shock would be that he did. The unthinkable thing would be that he was willing to stoop that low.⁷ There are several reasons Theophilus would have been shocked.

way Mary is using the word; and, 3) the prophecy only works with the common meaning. Imagine if the term simply meant young woman. “Here is your sign. Here is how you will know who The One is, he will be born to ... (drum roll please) a young woman!” The prophecy held that The One they were waiting for would be born to a virgin.

⁵ Matthew 1:18-2:23 and Luke 1:5-2:52 – the accounts of Christ’s birth – have little in common. Matthew dwells on the fulfillment of prophecy, the visit of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents. Luke reports on the responses of Zechariah, Mary’s relatives, Mary’s interaction with Simeon and the visit of the shepherds. Neither writer seems to know about the other writer’s work. However, Matthew and Luke have one thing in common – they report that Jesus was born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is an important point.

⁶ Let me add two other things here. First, virgin births were not any more common back then than they are today. Making this exactly the kind of thing Theophilus wanted Luke to check out, and exactly the kind of thing that Luke – a medical doctor – would have focused on. He would have been able to go to the person Larry King said would be his favorite interview – The Virgin Mary – and ask the most important question of all time, “Was it really a Virgin Birth?”⁶ You can imagine him going to an elderly Mary and saying, “OK. Let’s talk about the angel coming to you. And this whole idea that Joseph was not the father. That something supernatural happened. Talk to me about that. And then, after doing his research, he makes a special report about the fact that Mary was a virgin at the time that she conceived. Second, as miracles go, this is not a big one. At the end of the day, if you believe in a God who creates heaven and earth, then how is this so hard?

⁷ Martin Luther once remarked that the Incarnation consisted of three miracle, “The first, that God became man; the second, that a virgin was the mother; and the third, that the heart of man should believe this.”

1. The first is the idea that God was becoming flesh. Theophilus is a Greek name. Gnosticism was part of their worldview.
 2. The second is the location of his arrival. Vs 26 reads: **In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth.** Nazareth was so backwater that it's not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Talmud or Josephus's writings. It's such a dumpy, easy to overlook, nothing place that when Philip tells Nathaniel that he wants to introduce him to "the one Moses wrote about in the Law... Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" – Nathaniel's response is, "Nazareth? Are you kidding me? Can anything good come from Nazareth?"⁸ Upon hearing "Nazareth," Theophilus would have thought, "God decides to enter the world and he picks Nazareth?"
 3. And the third thing – as if God taking on human flesh is not enough. And Nazareth is not shocking enough, Theophilus who have also been stunned that God chose a poor, Nazarene girl to be his mother!
 - a) In those days marriages were arranged by parents, usually around the time that a girl entered puberty – so, perhaps as young as 12. Marriage followed a year later. So, maybe Mary is 14. So when Theophilus hears "a virgin from Nazareth, he not only hears poor - "she is from the other side of the tracks," he hears, "young."
 - b) You've seen lots of pictures of Mary. She is wearing a nice clean dress, her hair is combed, it may even be highlighted with a crown or a halo. She looks composed, even regal. She looks like a capable, unflappable, mature, stress-free, thirty-something Mom. These pictures are not helpful. Mary would not have recognized herself in any of them.
 - c) We need to think young. Here is a stock photo of some 14 year old girls today. Give her a threadbare dress. It's likely that if saw Mary today, you would not hire her as a babysitter. If she was cleaned up we still wouldn't let her drive a car. And yet, Theophilus is being told, God the Father entrusted the care of the Son of God to this young girl.⁹
- C. So, while the first thing Theophilus would have heard is that God is moving. A Virgi has conceived. The second thing would be – wow, he is not showing up in Rome with power and money. He is showing up in Nazareth and being born to a poor 14 year old.

VIII. The third thing that would likely have occurred to him is that the angel's announcement was wonderful news. Let me reread verse 28.

⁸ A wonderful restoration project has gone on in modern Nazareth to recreate first century Nazareth life. Google *Nazareth Village* for more information. Among other things, you'll see small mud and rock homes – about 500 square feet in total.

⁹ It's likely that Joseph was a bit older. In fact, he could have been significantly older, though I don't see any reason to think that he was. We know that when they go to dedicate Jesus at the temple they do not have any money at all, so it seems like he is young and not established. He could have been as young as 15.

A. And he (the angel Gabriel) came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

B. Mary was likely startled by the angel and then shocked at what he says,¹⁰ “You have found favor¹¹ with God and will give birth to the Son of the Most High.”

C. Vs: 31: **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.**

D. The shorthand here is: the Messiah is coming and you are the one who will give birth to him! “Remember the promise that a virgin would give birth to a child, well, that is going to be you. And He will be great. He will be called Son of the Most High. He will sit on the throne of David forever.”¹²

E. Theophilus would have thought, this is great news! Mary has been selected to fulfill God’s plan, and at long last things are about to happen. There is a sense in which the angel brings good news to her. She has found favor with God. But that thought would have been quickly followed by number four.

IX. Four: The announcement put Mary in danger.

A. Vs 34 records Mary asking, “**How will this be, since I am a virgin?**” We are not as quick to read between the lines as someone in the first century would have been. Theophilus and others would have quickly realized that one of the first things that would have run through Mary’s mind was, “This isn’t going to play well at home. Not with my father, not with my mother, not with my friends and certainly not with Joseph.”

B. We are not given a specific timeline, but we know that shortly after the angel spoke to her, she went to stay with Elizabeth – the person most likely to believe her story. And we also know that when Joseph found out she was pregnant he made plans to divorce her – and it was only the intervention of an angel in a dream that changed his mind.

¹⁰ It is likely that in that culture she did not even talk to many adult men.

¹¹ The word used here is only used one other time in the New Testament, in Eph. 1:6. It means “the free bestowal of grace.” She is being told that she is the recipient of undeserved favor and love. Mary was saved by grace just like everyone else who becomes a Christian. We are chosen by God to be recipients of grace. This is true of you if you are a Christian

¹² See 2 Samuel 7:12-16

C. I recently watched about 30 minutes of the Netflix on Mary, and – it is “an adaptation” of the nativity story that takes more than a few liberties with the biblical account. One of the things I thought they got directionally right was Joseph learning that Mary was pregnant. He was not happy, and his work colleagues mock him a bit about it and he ends up in a fight with one of them. I think Mary realized all of this right away. Which leads to the fifth thing. I don’t know if Theophilus would have picked up on this right away or not. But it is what we need to pick up on.

X. Five: Mary responds perfectly.

A. Vs. 38: **And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.** (The word she uses *doulos* – sometimes translated bond-servant, sometimes handmaid, it suggests she is at the bottom of the social hierarchy.); **let it be to me according to your word.”** I am a poor, simple, illiterate junior high girl. And this will not be easy. But I will do whatever you ask.

B. Wow! Please think about this for a moment. Mary had a plan. She was going to get married. Everyone would be there. She’d be celebrated. People would speak well of her. Her plan did not include getting pregnant outside of marriage with all that entailed in that culture at that time. Her plan did not call for giving up the small amount of comfort and security she had. The law not only stated that Joseph could divorce her. It also stated that she could be stoned.¹³

C. In light of this her response is brilliant. Perfect. Everything that could be asked of her. She says to Gabriel, “Those were not my plans. This assignment is going to cost me a lot. But, I am a servant and I defer to God.”¹⁴ Have you reached that point? Have you come to an understanding that God’s plans for you may not be your plans for you, but you will willingly accept them? Embrace them? Many people have not. Many Christ-followers pray, “thy will be done,” but do not really mean it. The expectation is, “I will worship you and in return I want you to bless my plans.”

XI. A while back I was at a pastor’s event and went to a break out on the rise of fear.

A. It was what I expected – about how fearful people are becoming, about how crippling fear can be, and how many people are now on meds to help them manage their fear – all of that. But then we were instructed to identify our fears as part of an exercise in surrendering everything – life, comfort, reputation, wealth – to God. Was there anything holding us back from moving forward with God?

¹³ Another possible treatment was for her to be tied up in the middle of town and left there for a few days as an example of what happens to those who commit adultery – sort of a 1st century Hester Prynne.

¹⁴ Martin Luther said perhaps the greatest miracle here is that she trusts God.

B. To that end we are given the assignment of writing a letter of surrender to God. We were given ninety minutes to do this. I took the assignment seriously and wrote out about a page long prayer. But upon immediate reflection I thought – I like Mary’s response better. What I wrote is not nearly as powerful or wise as the simple words of this 14-year-old girl. “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me according to your plan.”

XII. There is so much more we could think about there.

A. Such as the way Catholics and Protestants do not agree about Mary.

1. Roman Catholics hold that she was immaculately conceived – that is, was without a sin nature; that she remained a virgin her entire life; and that at her death she was assumed – as Jesus was, body and soul – directly into heaven where she was crowned Queen. It is a position of great honor and as a result she is prayed to and in some cases, worshipped.¹⁵

2. Most Protestants – noting that the Catholics have ascribed to her things not found in the Bible and consequently elevated her to a position that becomes idolatrous – tend to ignore Mary. She is brought out at Christmas time but ignored during the rest of the year.

¹⁵ The Roman Catholic Church (and to some extent, the Orthodox Church as well) affirm a number of things about Mary that are developed in their tradition but not found in the Bible. Chiefly: 1) The Immaculate Conception - that she was conceived without any stain of original sin. Many misunderstand this doctrine, believing that it refers to the conception of Christ in Mary’s womb. It does not. The Immaculate Conception, which was declared dogma on Dec. 8, 1854 by Pope Pius IX, states, “We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.” 2) The Perpetual Virginity of Mary – i.e., that she remained a virgin for her entire life; 3) The Assumption of Mary – that, like Christ, she was assumed (body and soul) into heaven at the time of her death and was welcomed there as Queen. Some additionally speak of her as the co-mediator (or co-redemptor) with Christ, though official Roman Catholic doctrine notes that she does not add to Christ’s redeeming work. Protestants do not accept these doctrines, and are also troubled by praying to Mary, noting that there is no record in the Bible of anyone praying to her. Indeed, after Acts 1, where it is noted that she was present with the disciples in the Upper Room at Pentecost, she is not mentioned again. Neither Peter nor Paul ever talk about her. Indeed, there is not one word in the Bible about any special place she occupies in the life of Christians. The Roman Catholic response to this is that she was bestowed a place of honor in the early church by “the unanimous consent of the Early Church Fathers.” I am not able to fully explore the history of Mary in a footnote. As with many things – it’s complicated. Yes, she was recognized and honored for her work and devotion, though the claim that this was the “unanimous consent of the Fathers,” is a bit misleading: 1) The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was not brought forward into the teaching of the church until 1140, and it was opposed by many (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux) and remained a matter of contention between the Franciscans and Dominicans until 1854; 2) Some Early Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, did not hesitate to teach that Mary had other children by Joseph after the birth of Christ, or that she sinned; 3) prayers to Mary do not appear in evidence until the 4th century; there is no mention of them in the voluminous writings of Athanasius, Basil, Chrysostom and Augustine 400 years after Pentecost; some Church Fathers condemn the practice as blasphemous; and the final line of the Hail Mary - "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." – was not added until The Council of Trent in the 16th century. I believe that Catholics err in giving Mary too much attention and Protestants err in giving her too little. We should not pray to her, but we should pray like her. She is blessed above all women – the one selected by God to raise his son.

B. Or about how seldom it's profitable to look at examples of people – other than Jesus – in the Bible. That is not what we do. It is what some people want to do. “Let's learn how to be brave like David or faithful like Joseph in Egypt.” That reduces the Bible to a collection of morality and inspirational stories.

C. But, wow, Mary gets this right and we can learn from her story.

1. I am a Protestant – we are a Protestant Church – and so as you might expect, I do not sign off with all the Catholic Church teaches about Mary. But we should not ignore her. She is the First Disciple, the greatest woman to ever live and an example we cannot overlook. I do not believe we should place our faith in her, but I do believe that we should strive to have a faith like hers. I do not believe that we should pray to her, but I believe we should pray like her.¹⁶

2. In an article entitled, *Saying Yes to God*, Ruth Haley Barton writes: Mary was more than an available womb. She was a particular kind of person for whom all of human history had been waiting... a person who was willing to receive Christ into the very depths of her being, allowing his presence to incubate there in the darkness until the fullness of time when God's will would be completely revealed.”

3. Are you willing to open up your life that completely to God? To say, “I am the Lord's servant. May it be unto me according to your will?” Are you willing to say, “Yes to God.” That is the right answer. That is the best answer. If you want your life to count that is always the right response.

¹⁶ Look at how she responds to the announcement of the angel. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” She accepted her assignment with humility and faith. She was willing to sacrifice herself to serve God and others. We should all be like her. She's a wonderful example for all of us, especially you young girls! Men, we could all learn a few things from Joseph. His assignment was not easy. It was a bit emasculating. And he takes upon himself the poor reputation of both his wife and son. He married a single mother and adopted her child – and because of this Christians have been on the forefront of adoption. That is not the easiest way to start a marriage. This may not be the script for your life that you would have mapped out. But it may be the one God has called you to embrace. Men, you can learn some things from Joseph. We can all learn some things from Mary. She was willing to say yes. God is looking for people who will say yes.

XIII. I want to be sure you focus on the need – on the opportunity you have – to say “Yes” to God, just like Mary did. That is our calling. It’s not a one time thing. It’s ongoing. Are you there? That is what God is looking for.¹⁷ People who will follow his lead. People who will serve.¹⁸ The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.¹⁹

A. Will you respond in faith and trust Jesus? Will you say, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me according to your plan.”

¹⁷ It is worth noting that God frequently selects those who are not qualified – at least not in the world’s eyes – to be the ones he works through. He chooses the youngest son (as opposed to the firstborn) or someone from the smallest tribe. He has a habit of choosing those others overlook, in part so it is clear who deserves the credit and glory. Mary would have been easy to overlook. She is not wealthy. She does not live in a beautiful palace. She is not going to be able to provide her Son with a great start – the best education, plenty of opportunities, chance to study the arts and travel. She is a “nobody from nowhere” until God says, “I chose you to raise my Son.” It’s a surprising move. But surprising in a very common way.

¹⁸ Some of you may think, “I got lots of questions and I want lots of answers before I step forward.” At one level I understand that. But at another, I want to say, we’ve got more than enough information to take a next step. We have lots more information than Mary does! We know a lot more about Jesus at this point than she did when she said, “I will do whatever is asked.”

¹⁹ 2 Chronicles 16:9