

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *May it be...*

SERIES: *Have a Mary Christmas*

SCRIPTURES: *Luke 1:26-38*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Scot McKnight*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church this morning. This morning is a special Sunday in the life of the church. As was mentioned earlier, this morning is the beginning of the **Advent** season.

Advent is a tradition that dates back many years. Some believe dating as far back as the 4th century. And, of course, the forms and traditions of Advent have changed over the years. Calendars, lighting candles etc. But in its most simplistic understanding Advent comes from a Latin word meaning, “**coming**” or “**arrival**”. It is that time of year when we remember Christ’s arrival as a child and anticipate His coming again.

This year as we prepare for and think about the Christmas Story, our series is called “**Have A Mary Christmas**”. And no, that is not a typo in the sermon series graphic. This year, I want to help us understand the significance of Jesus coming to earth through the experiences of his mother, Mary. And there are a number of reasons for doing this.

I. Why A Series on Mary?

I recently read a fantastic book by author Scot McKnight called “**The Real Mary**” and I highly recommend this book to you, it’s one my primary sources for this series. But

he begins his book suggesting a few reasons why following Mary's experiences is so valuable for us.

First, as protestants, **Mary's story has often been misunderstood** and miscommunicated because of the "perceived approach" to Mary by our Catholic brothers and sisters. We tend to think that *Catholics worship Mary and place her on the same level as Jesus and we want to avoid that.* And so in our efforts to avoid worshipping Mary, we have gone to the other extreme and often ignored or overlooked the significance of this young woman. In fact, most of us probably know more about "what we don't believe about Mary" than we know about "what we do believe about Mary." Part of the purpose of this series is to help us come to know the "real Mary" of the Bible, the young woman who was the Mother of Jesus.

Second reason for approaching the Christmas story through Mary's experiences, is because it turns out we actually have much in common with Mary. **In the story of Mary, we find our own stories.**

The story of Mary is really the story of an ordinary woman, a common peasant in ancient Israel, with an extraordinary vocation (being the mother of the Messiah) who learned to follow this Messiah through the ordinary struggles that all humans face. (McKnight) And in this sense, Mary represents each of us – you and me – in our call to follow Jesus.

Third and most importantly, because **Mary leads us to Jesus.** Just a few weeks ago we finished studying the book of James and it was fascinating to see how James came to believe that his brother, Jesus, was the long-awaited Messiah and savior of the world. The same is true of Mary, who came to know her son as Lord of her life. As a close friend said to me, *"If you think about it, Mary was the first believer in Jesus."* When we find the real Mary of Scripture, the Mary of the first century, we'll discover that she'll be talking about Jesus and pointing us all to Jesus.

And in the end isn't that what Christmas is about? The Christ candle that we will light in just a few short weeks. Jesus at the center. It's why we are a church knowing, loving and following Jesus. Mary's story...points us to the very heart of Christmas itself.

So join me on this journey through Mary's experiences for the next 4 weeks. If you have a Bible turn with me to Luke 1 and starting in verse 26. We begin today with an experience that is often referred to as

II. The Annunciation

Which is kind of a fancy church way of saying the announcement of Jesus birth.

Luke 1:26 - ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, 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."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. (Which is Mary's way of saying "What on earth is going on here?")

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him 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 Jacob's descendants 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 on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[b] the Son of God. ³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me according to your word.”

Ok, so first...Mary’s story begins with a multitude of...

A. Unexpected Surprises

Let’s try to put ourselves in Mary’s shoes for a moment...

First is **the appearance of an angel**. Raise your hand this morning if you saw an Angel this week? Nobody? Husbands, this was your opportunity, I set you up perfectly. Jenny is my Angel I see her every day. Perhaps it’s because we’re used to reading about angels and strange occurrences in the Bible, this doesn’t hit us as it should. Reality is, Angel’s don’t just “show up.” What did the angel look like? What is it even visible? Did Mary here an audible voice? Did she feel like she was talking to herself or hallucinating? It’s easy to overlook the peculiarity of the angelic visitor.

Beyond that, the Angel’s news is quite shocking, isn’t it? All Jews believed that one day a Messiah or savior would come to rescue them. But hundreds of years had passed since that promise was made. Mary is told, **the Messiah will be her child!** God had chosen this moment in history to fulfill that promise through her! This is surprise #2 for Mary.

And then throw in one more bit of surprising information.

Where do babies come from? You don’t have to answer that, but it’s not a trick question. Everybody knows where babies come from. This is one of those “parent-life-conversations” all parents must have at some point. I’ve told you when my kids come with questions like that, I always tell them “Go ask your mother.”

Mary knows she can't have a child. *"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"*

The angel responds that she will have this child by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's unexpected surprise #3.

"From all indicators, her life would not be extraordinary. She would marry humbly, give birth to numerous poor children, never travel farther than a few miles from home, and one day die like thousands of women before her – a nobody, in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere." (Kent Hughes 72)

Mary's life was supposed to be the epitome of average, normal, uninteresting. But that all changed...that first Christmas was one filled with unexpected surprises.

I just bet you can relate. Perhaps not directly...not the part about the angelic visit or the virgin birth. But the truth is, our lives also are filled with unexpected surprises, aren't they?

Of course some of those surprise are wonderful. Expecting mother's. A promotion at work. We want to rejoice and celebrate those wonderful surprises. But so often life's unexpected surprises are not cause for celebration, but rather fear, uncertainty, anger, regret.

There are some in here who this year received a disturbing health diagnosis. There are some who lost a job or were forced into job change. There are some in here who experienced a relationship breakdown. And you are left wondering, what on earth is going on here? This is the story of humanity and this is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary's story invites us to consider our own unexpected life surprises. What surprise did you experience in 2022?

Second, while there are a number of surprises in this story...perhaps the biggest surprise of all, is Mary's response.

Three of the most powerful words Mary ever spoke...

B. May it be...

Someone once said that the three most powerful words in church are "You may be seated" or perhaps "You are dismissed..."...but Mary's words rise above the rest.

"Surprise Mary, there's an angel in your house! Surprise Mary, your son will be the Messiah of the world! Surprise Mary, you'll conceive by the power of God's spirit. How does that all of that sound to you?" At that point, she should have told the Angel "You are dismissed..." but instead what did she say,

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word."

Theologian, Frederick Buechner, has a little book of character sketches of people from the Bible and he describes how the angel Gabriel may have felt as he brought this news to Mary and awaited her response: *"Mary struck the Angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of this young peasant girl."*

Perhaps the full gravity of Mary's response has not hit you the way that it should and a little bit of historical context may help.

Mary was young. Most sources suggest that she was between the ages of 13-16. Think about it, in our world, a girl of that age, cannot drive a car, drink alcoholic beverages, or to be honest really even go on a date. I have told my own daughter, Adalyn, she is not dating until at least 30. Mary is young.

But not only is she young, finding out she is pregnant before marriage is kind of humiliating...humiliating because you can't hide it. There are lots of things in our lives, embarrassing things that we can hide from those around us. Our eating habits, our thought lives, our flawed personal hygiene practices. We can hide our singing voices...that we use only in the shower or in the car all alone. We use make-up to hide our real skin, wrinkles, blemishes, we use hair products to hide our real hair color. We can hide so many things...Pregnancy is not one of them.

Pregnancy happens to be one of those things that is clear and obvious. And unwed pregnancy carries significant **shame** and embarrassment. And shame is such a powerful motivation in our lives, isn't it? If we know...something will shame us...we avoid it all costs.

Can you imagine, the looks that Mary got as her belly began to grow? The whispering and the rumors. Everyone would know. Everyone would talk. Everyone would assume. This is going to destroy her reputation. And I bet you the church people would be the worst!

But it wasn't just the shame, it was **the law** that Mary had to worry about most. It's important to keep in mind, as you enter into Mary's story, that she was living under Jewish law. This meant several clear and unmistakable things for her.

In the ancient Jewish world engagement, was a legally binding commitment. It's all but marriage, just without the ceremony and the consummation.

Joseph has every right to break off the engagement, drag her before the courts, publicly expose her unfaithfulness and even the potential she could be stoned.

This is from **Deuteronomy 22:23-24** - ²³ **If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, ²⁴ you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death...**

And while it's true that Mary wasn't unfaithful to Joseph...how do you think her explanation will hold up in court. "I promise I didn't sleep with another man, God's Holy Spirit did this to me." It sounds almost sacrilegious, doesn't it? Scot McKnight describes some of the ancient shaming practices that went on with unwed pregnancy... And I know some of the details I'm about to read are a little raw, but I just think so often we fantasize the Christmas story...and it's just really important that we put Mary back in her real historical context.

According to the fifth chapter of Numbers, a suspected adulteress (sotah) was brought before the priest and if the sotah maintained her innocence, which Mary would have maintained, she would have been taken to a conspicuous location for public humiliation.

She would have been required to drink the bitter waters...a mixture of dust, holy water, and the ink of the priests and then a curse would be spoken over her. Involving these words: "May the Lord cause you to become a curse among your people when he makes your womb miscarry and your abdomen swell..."her clothes would have been torn enough to expose a breast, her hair would have been let down, and all her jewelry would have been removed. And any passerby, especially women, would have been encouraged to stare at the publicly shamed woman in order to make an object lesson of her. (McKnight pg. 11)

Now can we just pause here for a moment. Knowing all of the shame and hardship she is about to experience, don't you marvel at Mary's response?... **"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me..."**

So often we turn Mary into a figure in a nativity scene and her story becomes almost fictional, tranquil, secondary. Mary's "may it be" that first Christmas was filled with incredible **courage**.

Phillip Yancey writes **"often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost."**

This is the challenge that Mary extends to all of us who also desire to follow Jesus in the midst of life's unexpected surprises. Mary exhibits for us the courage, grit, toughness and the determination required to be a disciple of Jesus.

I was reading a fascinating true story recently about an incredibly courageous woman, Patricia who experienced some of life's unexpected surprises. During her young life...*She suffered from diabetes, a heart attack, and two strokes; she went blind, went into renal failure (which required dialysis) and had both her legs amputated – all while only in her thirties...she was placed in a nursing home, except for those several times a year when she had to be hospitalized, frequently going into a coma for one or two weeks during those stays.*

Pat was also part of a church in DC, that wanted to create a homeless shelter. They could not find anyone with the leadership skills to pull it off, so she "I am the Lord's servant may it be to me....and she volunteered. In between dialysis and amputations and comas, she pulled together the team and got the zoning changes, architectural help, and fund-raising done. She then helped the team figure out the rules for the

homeless people who use the shelter, and she recruited and trained the staff who ran it.

Kind of makes you feel a little bit soft about how we handle life, doesn't it? I'm ready to give up when I can't even get the leaky faucet fixed in our kitchen or I get annoyed when the grocery store is sold out of my favorite coffee brand.

It's folks like Mary and Pat that say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me..." I'll do what it takes. (Soul Keeping, John Ortberg, pg. 29)

There's a classic old movie, that I'm sure none of you will be familiar with called **"The Princess Bride"**...for the longest time, one of the most quoted movies ever. As a pastor I can't tell you how often I've wanted to start a marriage ceremony, "Mawage...dat bwesses awangment, dat bwings us togeva today." Anyway, there is a line in the movie lies at the heart of the movies central theme. Author Gary Moon describes it like this...

"As the movie opens, we see the heroine (**PIC OF BUTTERCUP**) going about chores on a farm. Her name is Buttercup. Soon we meet a young man (**PIC OF FARM BOY**) who works on the farm and answers to the name "Farm Boy". Whenever Buttercup asks farm boy to do something for her, he always replies, **'As you wish.'** That's all he ever says to her. As they grow into young adult-hood, Buttercup seems to be developing a crush on Farm Boy. One day as he is about to leave the room, she asks him to fetch her a pitcher, which is within easy reach for her. Farm Boy walks over, then stares into her eyes, lifts the pitcher, and whispers: 'As you wish.' In that moment, returning his gaze, Buttercup realizes that every time he has said, 'As you wish,' he was really saying, 'I love you.'

On that first Christmas, as Mary received those unexpected surprises...her response to God was "As you wish...may it be"

You may not be asked to be the mother of the Messiah...but if you choose to give your life to the Messiah it will require courage to respond to God with as you wish. Jesus said to his disciples(John 14), ¹⁵ **“If you love me, keep my commands.**

These opportunities show up in so many ways every day of our lives.

Every time you choose a gentle voice with your kids or your co-worker when they frustrate you. That’s the courage to say “May it be, Jesus. I am your servant, Jesus.”

Every time you forgive your frustrating neighbor. That’s the courage of saying “May it be, Jesus.”

Every time you fight the temptation battle and choose purity over lust with your eyes. That’s your “may it be.”

Every time you choose honesty over deceit, even when it will make you look bad...that’s the courage to follow Jesus.

Every time you choose generosity over greed...

Every time you do the hard things that are necessary to help others, rather than complain about inconveniences in your own life...that’s the courage exhibited by Mary in following Jesus.

Do you stand back and marvel at young Mary’s courage? What an incredible woman!

Third and finally as we consider the Annunciation Story of Mary, it’s important to recall...

C. God’s Faithfulness

In the midst of Mary’s confusion, how is it that she could agree to go through with this plan? There be many factors involved. An Angelic visit may be enough to convince any of us.

But I think at the heart of Mary's courage was a certain level of trust that comes from knowing God's faithfulness.

Mary's YES was not based on personal adequacy. Mary's yes was not based on what was going to be personally beneficial to her. Mary's yes was not based on personal comfort. Mary's yes to God was based on God's faithfulness. I think the same must be true of us. We must come to know firsthand God's faithfulness in our lives.

How do we come to know and experience God's faithfulness in our lives?

1. Stories of God's faithfulness

Mary knew God's faithfulness through the Jewish Scriptures.

Perhaps more specifically, she knew the stories of other women in Jewish history who were threatened but protected by God.

Mary was likely familiar with the stories of **Tamar, Rahab, Ruth...Bathsheba**. All women who were taken advantage of by the patriarchal nature of their society and laws, but whom God honored and chose to play an integral role in the story of God's people and lineage of the Messiah who was to be born to her.

We too must share and recall God's faithfulness. One of the primary ways we do that is through the stories found in Scripture. Are you familiar with these stories? Mary was and it was one of the key factors in her "May it be..."

She knew that life is full of unexpected surprises, but she held onto God's faithfulness.

Second,

2. God's faithfulness instills hope.

There is a connection between God's faithfulness and our level of hope regarding life.

You see we humans have this tendency to mis-place our hope. We have this tendency to place our hope in so many things in our world, that let us down, that are not certain, that can't be relied upon.

We tend to place hope in our circumstances, which don't always work in our favor. We place hope in our wealth. We put our hope in our health. We put our hope in our activities or dreams. A lot of people have placed hope in our government or political leaders. Early church had this same problem, listen to how Paul instructs Timothy.

1 Timothy 6:17 - ¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain,

That's not Christian hope. Which is why Paul goes on to say...**but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.**

The Psalmist writes **...put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love** (He's not gonna let you down) **and with him is full redemption.**

Hope is based on trust in God's character! **God's past faithfulness, motivates hope for the future.**

The reason we have hope, is because God is reliable, you can trust him. Christian hope has a sense of certainty about it.

Third,

3. Saying yes to God always requires surrender.

Saying yes, to God as Mary did requires a consistent surrender to Jesus as Lord.

When I was writing this sermon, as Mary's words floated around in my mind "may it be"...it actually reminded me of another "may it be" in Scripture. Many years later, Jesus faces impending death and crucifixion. Prays in a garden to his father. He experienced many of those same human emotions surrounding life. Confusion, fear. But it was his trust in His father's faithfulness that he clung to ultimately.

"Please take this cup from me. But not my will, but yours be done." Jesus was repeating in a sense the same words his mother said the night the Angel visited her. *May it be to me according to your word. As you wish God. I trust you God. I'm placing my life in your hands God.*

We are not promised in this life to be sheltered from pain, harm and brokenness but we are promised that God is faithful. That he will enter into that pain with us. That's what the Christmas story is all about. It's not about God taking us out of the brokenness of this world...it's about God entering the brokenness with us.

What did the Psalmist say, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me."

If there's one thing you can cling to this week, next week, next month, next year. If there's one thing that walk you through the confusion and the fear of life...it's God's faithfulness.