

Christmas Eve: Mary Said 'Yes'

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[0 : 00] I'm so glad that we get to be together this evening. In our church, you know, we have two campuses, if you will, two congregations, one's in Northeast and one's in Northwest.

We had a wonderful children and family service this morning in Northeast. But the opportunity to gather, so many people traveling and out of town, the opportunity to gather like this tonight in this kind of intimate setting with just a few of us gathered here.

I don't know if there's something especially appropriate about it. It feels right to sort of have this intimate gathering. If you're new to our church, my name is Tommy.

I just want to welcome you. So glad that you're joining us for Christmas Eve. It's a wonderful night. So much that we could talk about this evening.

One of the things I want to meditate on for just a few minutes is the person of Mary. The Christmas story is this story that we, if you grow up in our country, you hear and you tell again and again and again and again.

[1 : 09] It becomes rote. We hear it so many times. And it's easy to forget or to lose sight of the fact that Christmas is the answer to a mystery that spanned thousands of years.

That if you read the Old Testament from the beginning all the way through the book of Malachi, it is asking this great question. It's telling this story, but it's withholding the answer.

From the earliest pages of Scripture, there's this promise that one day God is going to come and he's going to rescue his people. He's going to be their shepherd.

He's going to restore the world. And he's going to restore human beings. And yet at the same time, there's this question of God's anger at sin and his desire to bring justice and judgment.

And so this mystery is set up from the earliest pages of Scripture. How is God going to accomplish all of this? What's it going to look like? Is it going to be mercy or is it going to be judgment?

[2 : 18] What's going to happen? We can't overstate the importance of the fact that the first person in history to be let in on the answer to that mystery, a mystery that Ephesians says the angels longed to look upon the answer to this mystery.

No one knew what was going to happen. And the first being in existence to be let in on the answer was Mary. Not some great prophet, not some king, not some important leader, but a 14-year-old girl.

And I think that tells you a lot about the heart of Christianity, that the very first person to be told, to be let in on the secret, was a young, mostly probably uneducated teenage girl.

And so we're going to look at her because she is extremely important. We can't overstate the importance of Mary, not only for Christians but for seekers and people who are trying to figure out what they believe about Christmas and about Jesus.

She's immortalized in Scripture as the first human being ever to hear the name Jesus and the first person ever to have a chance to respond to the gospel message. She's the first one ever to have an opportunity to hear and to respond to the gospel message at the heart of the Christian faith.

[3 : 48] And so in many ways, she is the first Christian. And she's a paradigm for us as we look at this passage for what it looks like to follow Jesus in this world.

So I just want to focus in on a couple of qualities that we see in Mary in Luke chapter 1 that I think are qualities that we should all hope to emulate.

The first is that she's spiritually open. And the second is that she's humbly obedient. So spiritual openness and humble obedience. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you of all nights for this night, Lord, where we celebrate this great mystery of you, Lord, becoming flesh so that you could fulfill your promise to be the God who dwells with your people, Emmanuel.

And because you are with us, we know that you can speak to us. And so we pray for your word now, Lord, that our hope rests not in human wisdom or rhetoric, but rather in your eternal word, your Son, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 57] It's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, Mary has a spiritual openness. And let's read the first few verses in this passage.

It says, In the sixth month, which is, by the way, referring to Elizabeth's pregnancy. She's six months pregnant. That's what it's talking about there. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph.

Betrothal was a little like, it was more than engagement but less than marriage. It was somewhere between engagement and marriage. Much more formal than our engagement would be and yet not quite fully consummated.

So somewhere in between. Betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one.

The Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled. And that means terrified. Another translation would be she's terrified. At the saying. And tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

[6 : 04] In other words, she's trying to figure out if her life is in danger. It's an overwhelming experience that she's encountering. You know, it's easy to imagine Mary as this great woman.

As this, like, exceedingly holy person. This sort of walking saint. And a lot of traditions have risen up around Mary in the last couple of centuries to that end.

There's a tradition that was codified in the mid-1800s in the Catholic Church that says that Mary was born sinless. That's the Immaculate Conception doctrine.

And so that tradition is fairly recent. Last couple of hundred years is when that gained prominence.

There's another tradition that says that Mary remained perpetually a virgin. And all of these traditions have risen up around the idea that Mary must have been, she must have been extraordinary in some way.

There must have been something extra holy about her. But the thing is, when you actually look at what Scripture tells us, if anything, it emphasizes the opposite.

[7 : 07] That she's profoundly ordinary. Profoundly ordinary. If you look at, she's living at home with her parents in Nazareth, in Galilee.

As I said, she's a young teenager, probably 14 years old. Could have been as young as 12, but probably more like 13 or 14. It's a young girl. Right?

She's not married. She's betrothed. Most likely, she has no formal education of any kind. She's from the house of David, but by this point in history, there's a lot of people who can trace their lineage back to David, and that doesn't really mean anything that important.

She's certainly not an upper class person. She's betrothed to Joseph, so she's probably preparing for marriage and kids, and kind of, you know, in that mindset, and some of you know what that's like.

You're sort of all wrapped up in all the ways that your life is about to change, and planning for your family, and all that kind of stuff. So she's in the midst of a very normal life. And then out of the blue, she has this face-to-face encounter with the supernatural.

[8 : 13] The angel Gabriel appears to her, and announces the coming of Jesus through her womb into the world. And what you see if you read this account is, is that on the one hand, she's terrified.

She's deeply troubled. At first, she doesn't know what's going to happen. And yet, below that, there's an openness. In other words, she doesn't run away. She doesn't close herself off to it. She remains, and she wants to know more. She's curious. Help me understand how this is going to happen. I'm still a virgin. Help me understand. I don't understand.

There's an openness, and a desire to know more. So, this is the first thing that I just want to reflect on for a few minutes. As I think about myself, as you maybe reflect on your own heart, are we spiritually open?

Are we open to the possibility of things that go beyond what we can see, and hear, and touch, and taste, and feel? Are we spiritually open to spiritual realities that are well beyond what our senses can detect?

[9 : 22] Abraham Kuyper was a great Dutch theologian and politician and writer and thinker. And, he says that there are essentially two ways of being conscious in the world.

There's two ways of being conscious in the world. He says, many people, before they even begin to make sense of reality, most people begin with the assumption that the material world is all there is. That if I can't sense it, if we can't detect it and measure it and explain it, then it's not real. So, most people begin that way in our modern era.

Things are, as they appear to be, there's nothing beyond this world. Materialism. And then he says, there's a different kind of person. The other way of being conscious. These are people who have experienced some kind of break.

So, he says, some people have, in the course of their life, maybe they were materialists, but then they had an encounter. They experienced something that fell outside of what they believed to be possible.

[10:29] And it has caused them to have to re-evaluate their assumptions about the nature of reality. And they become open. They become open to the possibility of the divine, the transcendent, the spiritual.

Their world is kind of cracked. And a divine light begins to shine through into it. And I think that if we think about our lives, our lives are full of these glimpses of the supernatural.

These cracks through which the possibility of the divine shines through. The question is, are we open to those experiences?

Are we receptive to them? Do we even notice them when they happen? Now, it will probably not be an angel appearing in the middle of the night in your bedroom. You know, that happened to Mary. Probably not going to happen to us. I'm totally fine with that. But that doesn't mean that there aren't other ways that the possibility of the divine might shine into our lives.

[11:29] For Leonard Bernstein, the great composer, it didn't come in the form of an angel. It came in the form of Beethoven's Fifth. Leonard Bernstein, when he, he says, when he hears Beethoven's Fifth, it leads him to believe that, quote, there is something right in the world, something that follows its own laws consistently, something that checks throughout, something that will never let us down.

So, he hears the music, and there's something in that music that makes him think, or rather know, there has to be something more out there.

Now, he's not a Christian, but the music, for him, is a crack, where he begins to see beyond the material to something more.

For Bob Dylan, I don't know if you've read much about Bob Dylan, especially since he, you know, has been in the press, and received the prize, and all that. But Bob Dylan talks a lot about the power of art in his life.

He believes that all art leads us to God. He says, if it doesn't lead us to God, it leads us somewhere else. But no art is neutral. And for him, art has been a massive way that God has drawn him to himself.

[12:47] For many people, I think, that glimpse of the supernatural, that glimpse, the idea that there's something, has to be something more than this, came in 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV, walked into an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, armed to the teeth.

He shot eight girls, killed five, and then he took his own life. Now, that wasn't the part that got people. What got people is what happened within hours of that shooting. The very same day, the very same day, that this shooting happened, families of the victims reached out to the family of the gunman to offer their care, their comfort, to express their forgiveness.

They even set up a fund to care for the family of the shooter long term, to make sure that they were provided for. And many people read this story, and they said, this cannot be possible.

This is not the kind of thing that happens in our world. People don't do this. It's just not reality. And yet, what they see unfolding before them is that very thing.

And that, I think, for many people, was a profound glimpse into a world that goes well beyond what we can make sense of with our five senses.

[14:03] There has to be something more to explain that kind of forgiveness. You know, for me, one such experience came in the form of a wreck. You know, Laura and I were driving out to Seattle.

We were, this is my wife Laura, we were like 21 and 22, and we're driving cross-country to Seattle. And at this one point in the drive, for lots of stupid reasons, neither one of us were buckled in.

And we're in a suburban with a bench seat. And the cruise control is set at about 75 miles an hour. And we're loaded to the, to the, you know, packed to the gills with everything we own.

You know, this suburban is massively overloaded. My best friend is asleep in the back seat, just on a pile of our junk. And we lose control of the car. And we start fishtailing, fishtailing, fishtailing. We, we turn into a skid. We skid across in front of a semi-truck, hit a ditch, and roll three and a half times into a cornfield. And our stuff just goes everywhere.

[15:03] Just out of every, all the glass is smashed out. Our stuff is firing out all over the sidewalk and everything. So we come to a rest on our side. And I climb out of where the windshield used to be.

I have to kind of climb out that way because everything's smashed up. As I'm climbing out, I turn around and I grab Laura and I kind of pull her out. And then we hear my friend groan. And he sort of climbs out, digs out from being completely buried in all of our junk that was on top of him.

So we all kind of crawl out. And I remember sitting there just sort of shaking broken glass out of my hair all over the, all over the ground. And a couple of minutes later, a highway patrol guy comes up and he looks at us.

He looks at the car. He looks at us. And he says, who else is in the car? We said, it was just us. And he says, just you? And we said, yeah. The ambulance arrives. They check us out. I, you know, was, we were essentially completely unharmed.

Few scars from climbing out of the car. But that was it. And I got it. I remember getting in the front seat of the car and the highway patrol guy is writing his report, writing his report. And I'm just sitting there quietly.

[16:11] I'm, you know, what do you say after something like that happens? I don't know what to say. So I was just sitting quietly. And he just stops writing and he looks at me and he says, are you, are you religious? And I said, well, yeah.

I mean, I actually had become a Christian like earlier that year. And so I said, yeah, I am. And he said, well, he said, I'm not a religious person. And he said, I, you know, I haven't been religious since I was a kid.

He said, but I've been doing this for 15 years. And he says, I've never seen a wreck like that. Ever seen a wreck like that. Where there weren't bodies. And he said, what happened to your car? And the fact that all of you survived and more than survived. I mean, I didn't have a bruise. I didn't have a scratch. I wasn't sore. He said, I don't know what you believe or how religious you are, but somebody out there was taking care of you.

That's all I know. And we just sat there for the long, this longest time. And he was so touched by this experience that he then, you know, basically drove us around town and took us and made sure we got a hotel and make sure all of our needs were met and couldn't believe it.

[17:10] And anyway, this was his experience that Laura and I come back to again and again. And we say, we were miraculously preserved that day. Now that doesn't always happen. Angels don't always show up in bedrooms.

Miracles don't always happen, right? The question that we need to wrestle with is, when something like that does happen, do we just write it off? We say, well, we got lucky.

Well, the wreck wasn't as bad as it looked. Or do we stop and do we pay attention? Are we open to the possibility that something more is happening, that we need to pay attention to it?

This is the first question. Are we spiritually open? You know, for Moses, it wasn't an angel, it was a burning bush. He looked and he saw something that shouldn't have been possible.

You familiar with dark matter and dark energy? When scientists try to measure the universe, planetary motion, expansion of the universe and all that, all of the visible things that we can measure, when you add all of those numbers up, what we observe in the universe doesn't make sense.

[18:16] The only way to explain it is if you build in the idea of dark matter and dark energy. Essentially, matter and energy that we cannot see, we cannot measure, we have no way of knowing even really what it is.

But unless we allow the possibility of dark matter and dark energy, the numbers simply don't add up. And so what I'm saying to you is that the same is true spiritually. When you look at your life, when you look at human existence, if you go purely on what we can see, touch, hear, taste, feel, life doesn't add up.

When you look at something like the Amish forgiving the shooter, when you look at some of these breaks, the power of Beethoven's fifth, the power of art, the yearning to create and experience

beauty, love, altruism, unless we allow for the possibility of the divine.

Even if we can't fully understand it, even if we can't measure it or detect it, it doesn't add up. So we need to be spiritually open. Mary's spiritually open. The next quality that you see in Mary, the second quality, is that along with her openness, she is humbly obedient.

She's humbly obedient. It says in verse 30, And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

[19 : 38] He will be great. He 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.

So this angel says to Mary that God has a specific purpose for her to play in his great plan. That she's going to be the one to bear God's son into the world.

And even though she's full of fear, and even though she's full of questions, How's this going to happen? I'm a virgin. What do you mean? Even though she has all of these fears and doubts and uncertainties, in the midst of that, her response has become the paradigm for the entire Christian life.

This is it, in a nutshell. The Christian life boiled down to one sentence. Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. That's it.

So the thing we need to understand is, on the one hand, spiritual openness makes it possible for us to encounter God. But if you really want to know God, if you really want to have a relationship with God, that's not possible.

[20 : 45] Unless at some point, you reach the place where you're willing to humble yourself, and to become obedient to following where God leads.

You know, G.K. Chesterton has that great quote about, he says, an open mind is a lot like an open mouth. You know, it's great to open your mouth, but you open it so that you can eventually close it on something.

And a mind is very similar. It's good to be spiritually open, but at some point, an open mind is open because we're meant to receive something. We're meant to clamp down on something that comes along that we believe is true.

And so, in the same way, you know, God doesn't come to us and say, you're going to bear my son into the world in the way he did to Mary, but in many ways he does. That's the invitation of the Christian life, is that God desires to bear the presence of his son into the world through us.

And so, in a way, God comes to us the way he came to Mary. There's this invitation. You know, he says, you know, the whole Bible is this great story of God's plan to save and restore the world.

[21 : 56] You know, so all racism, all injustice, all poverty, all disease, the whole Bible is the story of how God is one day going to end it. And so, the invitation that he extends to us is whether or not we want to be a part of that plan that is unfolding in the world.

And each human being has a part to play in that plan of renewal. You know, for Mary, it was bearing Jesus into the world. But each of us has a part to play. So that should make us think about our lives and how we think about our lives.

And I know that everyone here has some sense of the way you hope your life will be. Right? You have some sense of the kind of life you want to have. I mean, I know some people who they say, well, I really want to have an adventurous life.

I want to have a lot of diverse experiences. I want to travel. I want to meet lots of different kinds of people. I want excitement. I want, that's the kind of life I hope to live. Other people are the opposite. You know, they want security.

They want safety. They want predictability. They want to make sure, well, I just want to make sure I have a good place to live. I'm safe. My needs are met. I make enough money. That's what I really care about. You know, some people say, well, I don't care about anything else.

[23 : 04] I just want a big family with lots of kids. That's what I really want. I just want to have a lot of kids. Other people say, well, I don't really know about kids. I really want a successful career. I really want to make that happen. Some people say, I want a lot of kids and a successful career.

Some people say, I want to be successful. I want to be famous. Some people say, I don't care about being famous. I just want to make a difference. But the point is, everybody has some sense of how they hope their life will go.

I think all of us have lived long enough to develop those expectations. Some people here, some people here have lived even longer and you've lived just long enough to begin to realize that very rarely does life actually pay any attention to our plans.

That the vast majority of the time, things do not play out the way we hope, which is a clear sign that we're not in fact in control the way we think we are. Best proof that we're not God is that our lives have nothing to do with our plans.

That our lives do what they want to do. That things happen to us that are outside of our control. And so if you've lived long enough to actually realize that, and even if you look at your life now, you may say, man, I thought I would be here and tonight, Christmas Eve, I'm here.

[24 : 15] And what do I do with that? You begin to realize the real choice in life is not to lay out the plan for the kind of life we want to have. The real choice boils down to the choice that Mary had to make. Do I continue trying to make life into what I hope it will be?

Or do I surrender? And do I allow the Lord to graft me into the plan that He is enacting in the world? Do I try to clutch at my agenda?

Or do I abandon myself to His agenda? And you know, a lot of Christians try to have it both ways. We try to, you know, I follow Jesus and I go to church and do all the things I'm supposed to do and yet at the same time, I kind of want to live life on my terms.

But the only way we can really do this is if we say what Mary said. You know, behold, I'm the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. So the question I think that we need to end with here is are we willing to do what Mary did?

Which is essentially to give God a blank check. You know, here's my life. I'm going to give this check to you and I'm going to say yes and I'm going to promise that I will cash, you know, whatever you write on that check.

[25 : 27] I'm going to agree to it beforehand. And that's a scary thing to say. And yet that's the invitation that God extends to Mary and to us. So someone asks, you know, well why does it have to be so black and white?

Why is it so all or none? I mean, this is such black and white thinking. Why can't you be more nuanced about this? And I would say, well, I love nuance as much as the next guy but when it comes to what we believe about Jesus, there's no room for nuance.

If you look at the claims that are being made about Jesus to Mary, here are the claims. He's not just going to be godly, he's going to be God, the son of the most high.

He's not just going to live a great life, he's going to live forever. He's going to become the greatest king of the world and his kingdom will have no end. Now, those claims go way beyond any human being.

They're so massive that they demand an all or none response. In other words, you either hear that and reject it outright and say, well, there's no way that could be true.

[26 : 27] And if that's the case, you walk away. I do not understand people who say, well, you know, I don't believe that Jesus was actually the son of God, I don't believe that Jesus actually rose bodily from the grave, but I still appreciate Christian tradition and so I still want to be a Christian.

Do not do that. You know why? Christianity is way too hard. It's way too inconvenient. It asks way too much of us to do it if this isn't true.

So, if it's not true, I say walk away. You know, Buddhism is a great religion to explore. There's lots of religions that are very enjoyable, a lot of health benefits.

Christianity, way too hard. Don't do it if it's not true. But if it is true, if it is true, if Christmas is true, if the eternal, creative God of the universe actually has entered into our world and become flesh, become one of us to save us and to rescue the world, if that is indeed true, if he is indeed the son of the most high, then we should abandon everything else and completely reorient our lives around him.

Right? That's the kind of response it merits. It's either one or the other. The one option that Jesus does not leave open to us is to say, well, you know, I really respect him. You know, I think, you know, he had some nice things to say.

[27 : 50] He just doesn't allow that possibility. You either completely reject him as a lunatic, as a crazy person, or as an evil person, or as a myth, or if you accept what Christmas says about him, then you fall to your face and you worship him.

It's one or the other. Of course, no one gets it right all the time. And even those of us who say, I want to give my life to him.

I want to worship him. Again and again and again, we come back to our own agendas. Again and again and again, we try to have it both ways. We try to say, let it be according to both of our words, right?

That's the game we play. And so that's why Christmas is such a great source of hope and what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. Because all other major world religions say that our hope, our salvation, our future, it all hinges on us.

It hinges on my ability to make promises to God and to keep them, to follow God's rules and laws, to live up to God's standards, that it all hinges on me. And if I fail or if I fall short, I have no hope.

[29 : 04] But Christianity is the exact opposite. Because it says that our hope isn't based on us, it's actually based on God himself. You know, when the angel comes, Mary's terrified.

You know, who knows what she's thinking, but she's probably thinking, I have not lived up to God's standard, I have not lived up to his law, and now he's here and he's going to strike me dead.

Lightning's going to strike. You know, God saw the things I was thinking about my family, God saw the things I was thinking about, my soon-to-be husband, God saw all the ways that I fail and I doubt and I question and, you know, I, you know, all the ways that I fall short.

And now God has fed up with me and Gabriel's here and lightning's going to strike and I'm just going to be a smoking hole in the ground. She's terrified. And what does Gabriel say?

Don't worry, Mary. Here's the standard and you just barely made it. So you've got nothing to worry about. No. He says, you have found favor with God.

You have found favor with God. Your hope isn't based in your own goodness. It's in God's favor.

God looked at you and he said, I want her to belong to me. And he has placed his favor on you.

[30 : 17] Right? So this is the Christmas hope. Our hope isn't based on our ability to obey God. It's based on God's willingness to extend grace. So at Christmas, you see God becoming in every way like us so that through the death and the resurrection, we might one day become in every way like him.

So this Christmas Eve, I pray that we would all be spiritually open to the hope of the gospel. And I pray that we would all have the courage that Mary did to be humbly obedient, to allow ourselves to become part of God's plan to make all things new.

Let's pray. ■■ migrant people twins who end up marriage being part of God's plan to make sure you put yourself to the ■ CUHA and to be ■■ damage and being the most person.

And I pray horribly to come out from God's plan and Church doing some miah boring game which can make Halloween a year and peace is really we will all kind of you