

The Mother of God

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[0 : 00] Well, like many of you, I absolutely love Christmas, and I look forward to it every year. And one of the things that we love to do, probably like many of you, is to watch Christmas movies.

We have a whole list of movies, and there's a strategy that goes into when we watch which movie. And I'm very much next week looking forward to watching all of our favorites. And it's funny, if you think about all of our favorite Christmas movies, there are some that are sort of of the moment, and there are some that last. There are some that sort of endure for generations. And so as I think about some of my favorites, these are some that really have endured. Obviously, there are many versions of A Christmas Carol. That's one that many people love. It's a Wonderful Life. I always forget how wrecked I will be after watching that movie. By the end, I'm like, and I'm not kind of a crier, but man, that movie absolutely demolishes me every time I watch it. The Bishop's Wife, even How the Grinch Stole Christmas has this kind of enduring quality to it.

[1 : 03] And it's funny, I think one of the reasons why these particular stories resonate is because they all sort of have this theme of transformation in them.

They all convey the idea or the hope that Christmas seems to have this kind of power to change people. It leaves them different after they encounter it.

They become more generous. They become more selfless. They become more forgiving. People emerge from Christmas more humble, more joyful. And I think that resonates with us.

At least it resonates with me because we want that kind of experience for ourselves. We want that kind of change in our lives.

And the good news is that Christmas actually does have the power to change people. But we need to understand how that change happens if we are to experience it ourselves.

[2 : 05] And so what I want to do as we look at this gospel reading that we just heard from Luke chapter 1, I want to take a few minutes to look at the very first person ever to be transformed by Christmas, which is the person of Mary.

To paraphrase Professor Carolyn Lewis, she says this about this passage. In these few verses, we witness the radical transformation from peasant girl to prophet, from denial to discipleship, from Mary to the mother of God.

So we're going to look at this story and ask how this transformation happens in Mary's life. And we see three elements that are crucial for this kind of change to occur in her life, in our lives.

Let's pray, and then we will look at God's Word together. Lord, we thank You for this Sunday morning, and we thank You for the excitement and the joy around Christmas.

We thank You for the freedom and the ability to gather together, to sing these great songs, to pray, to open Your Word together, to come and to share the food at Your table, Lord.

[3 : 17] We thank You. And before we feast at Your table with bread and wine, I pray that we would feast on Your Word. I pray that You would nourish us with Your Word and do Your work in us through Your Word.

We pray this, Lord, that You would be glorified in us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So the first element that we see in this story that is crucial for lives to be actually meaningfully changed as the element of grace, grace.

Over the years, people have come to imagine that there was something special about Mary.

They've come to think that Mary must have been an exceedingly great woman.

She must have been wise beyond her years. She must have been extra holy in order for God to do this kind of thing through her. And so traditions have arisen around Mary, many of which have arisen over the last couple of centuries, that Mary was, for example, sinless from birth, the idea of

the Immaculate Conception, or that she must have remained a perpetual virgin for the rest of her life after giving birth to Jesus.

There are these traditions, and they all support this idea, that there must have been something that set Mary apart from the rabble in order for God to be able to use her in the way that He did.

[4 : 42] But if we look at what Scripture actually tells us, Mary was profoundly ordinary. We see a girl living at home with her parents in Nazareth of Galilee, a kind of nowhere town.

She's a teenager, probably around 14 or 15 years old. Most likely, she has no formal education of any kind. And the thing that stands out in the Scripture is that nothing stands out about Mary.

She's a normal human being, flaws and all. And it raises this question for us as we try to grapple with this, and it has for people over the centuries, why does God choose to use her?

And the angel simply says this, you have found favor with God. You have found favor with God.

God has chosen to bestow His grace and favor upon you.

This is what we might refer to as God's preemptive grace. God preemptively choosing to pour grace into someone's life before they even ask for it.

[5 : 50] God's preemptive grace. See, all other major world religions say that it's up to us, more or less, to earn the favor of our deity through devotion and obedience and dedication and long-suffering and sacrifice.

Whatever your code asks of you, it is only by performing that up to standard that you then earn the grace and the favor of your God. But Christianity says the exact opposite.

It turns that all the way around. It says that our hope isn't based on our ability to earn the favor of God. It's not based on our ability to stand out from the masses and show that we are somehow worth or worthy of blessing.

It says that our hope is based entirely on God's desire to bless us even though we don't deserve it. And that's extremely important. And this is the first thing that we need to see when it comes to true change in a human life.

If God chose to use Mary because she was extraordinary in some way, then this is just an interesting story. And good for her.

[7 : 05] But the fact that God chose to use Mary despite the fact that she was an ordinary sinful human being, that means that God can do the same kind of thing in our lives.

That means that God can use people like us. That means that God can do extraordinary things through ordinary people. Now, this is not to minimize how amazing it was that Mary might be able to be called the Theotokos, the God-bearer.

It is a great and singular honor. But it also says that God can do amazing and extraordinary things through ordinary people like us.

And so the road to transformation begins with grace. It begins with the recognition that we worship a God who looks at a world full of people who ignore Him and who reject Him.

And He chooses to love them and to pour grace into their lives before they even ask for it. That's where it starts. The next thing that we see in this story, the next piece of this transformation puzzle, is that Mary not only encounters the grace of God, but then she comes face to face with something that she cannot explain.

[8 : 25] So the next element is encounter. The angel Gabriel appears to her and he announces that Jesus, the long-awaited Savior of the world, is going to enter the world through her as a newborn.

And Mary, it says, is greatly troubled by this. She can't possibly understand how such a thing could be possible. It's way beyond her ability to understand.

But that's the whole point. She's willing to accept that there are things in the world that go beyond what she can understand. In other words, Mary is truly open-minded.

She's open to the possibility that there are things beyond her understanding, beyond her five senses, that are very real and very important.

And, you know, there are some people who are closed off to that possibility. They sort of live life with a perspective that is closed. Closed to the possibility of the transcendent.

[9 : 24] Closed to the possibility of the supernatural. Closed to the possibility of the divine. And so any suggestion of that is written off as mere superstition. But then there are also people who are open to the transcendent.

And many of these people are open because they've had some experience that doesn't line up with what they thought possible. Something that they can't explain. Some encounter that forces them to recognize that there are things beyond what we can see and hear and taste and touch.

These people are open-minded. They're open to the supernatural and thus the divine. You know, you may be familiar with a very famous letter in 1897. A little girl named Virginia O'Hanlon wrote into the New York Sun.

And she asked, is there a Santa Claus? Tell me. All right. Once and for all, I want to know, is there a Santa Claus? Her father encouraged her to do it.

And a man named Francis Church responded to her letter. And his response has become famous. And there's a passage near the end of the letter that I just want to read.

[10:36] So Church writes this in response to Virginia's question. He says, You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside. But there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart.

Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond.

Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world, there is nothing else real and abiding. It's very clear that he is talking about much more than Santa.

That he's talking about the importance of being open to supernatural realities, to transcendent realities. He's saying there is an unseen world.

There are wonderful things that exist beyond what we can know with our five senses, the greatest of which is God himself. He's saying, in fact, the things that are most real are things that exist beyond what we can see in this material existence.

[11:55] So our lives are full of these moments that hint at or point at realities beyond all of this. Some of us have had these experiences.

You know, there's a man named Bede Griffiths who's an English Benedictine monk. He was walking outside one day as a university student, and he had an experience that turned his life toward God. He says this, everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. He says, I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me.

I felt inclined to kneel on the ground. I hardly dared to look at the face of the sky because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God. He's just walking along one day, and all of a sudden he becomes keenly aware that he is in the presence of something vastly greater than himself.

The composer, Leonard Bernstein, was not religious at all, but he once said that when he hears Beethoven's Fifth, it leads him to believe that, as he says, there is something right in the world.

[13:00] There is something that follows its own laws consistently. There is something that checks throughout, something that will never let us down. He's saying, this music points me to something beyond all of this, something ultimate.

Bob Dylan once said that art can lead you to God, and then he said, I think that's the point of everything. And I think he's exactly right. You know, the mere fact that there is something rather than nothing points to the existence of God.

You know, in other words, you're free to dismiss the whole idea of the virgin birth of Jesus, but you still have to explain the virgin birth of the galaxy. God is everywhere, and he's calling to us.

And the real question that we need to ask is not, is God speaking to me? It's, am I listening? Are we paying attention? You know, when we're walking along in the afternoon and that moment begins to set in, are we receptive to it?

So when it comes to the possibility of transformation, the first point is that transformation begins with God's grace. The assumption in the Bible is that God loves you, he is for you, and his grace is at work in your life.

[14:25] And his goal is to awaken you and bring you to himself. And then the second element is encounter. There are opportunities all around us to encounter God in ways that are often very unexpected.

But the third and final part of this story is crucial. The third piece, there's grace, there's encounter, but finally there is surrender. Surrender. The question is not whether we will encounter God.

The real question is, how will we respond when we do? Because sooner or later, we will all encounter God. Mary probably had a plan for her life.

Mary probably had a sense of how she thought things were going to play out, and chances are she was very attached to that plan. And maybe she had the timeline all worked out of when everything was going to happen.

But then God derails her plans. Through an unplanned pregnancy, God calls Mary to go in a very unexpected direction. And she took all of the plans that she had meticulously laid out, and she just threw them in the trash.

[15 : 35] Because her life was going to go in a very different direction. And what Mary has to decide here is whether she will continue living life on her terms according to her plan, or surrender herself to live on God's terms, which can be quite terrifying.

Even though she's fearful, and even though she is full of questions, and even though she knows she's dealing with things she cannot possibly comprehend, Mary responds by saying this, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. And her response, friends, has become the paradigm for the entire Christian life. If you want to summarize the Christian life in a sentence, it is this, Let it be to me according to your word.

It's total surrender. It's saying to God, I will follow you no matter where it leads. I will follow you. And you know, this is very important for us because our lives rarely go according to plan.

They rarely go according to plan. Life is absolutely filled with interruptions and detours, small and large. Every day is filled with little interruptions and detours.

[16 : 53] And they always seem to come at the worst time. They always come at the worst time, right? The morning of the most important meeting of the year, there's standstill traffic.

The very first day of the vacation that you've been looking forward to all year, and you get a stomach virus. Right? When you have absolutely no more money to spend, you are maxed out on major appliance breaks.

Right? That's always when it happens. And then there are the massive, there are the life-altering detours. Right? Just as you settle into your career and think, This is what I want to do for the rest of my life, you lose your job.

Just as you start trying to get pregnant, you find out you can't. Just as you're planning for retirement, you get a cancer diagnosis. Now, I know that some people are really struggling this Christmas.

And we are dealing with things that are totally outside of our control. And it makes Christmas not the fun, joyful celebration that it seems to be for other people. It makes it a hard slog because of the things that we're facing.

[18 : 03] But even though these things seem random and unexpected to us, they are not that way to God. God never drops the ball.

God never does anything by accident. God never does anything by accident. God never does anything by accident. And God has the ability to use these experiences to do His work in our lives in ways that we cannot possibly understand or comprehend.

One of my favorite writers who has suffered a lot in her own life, one of my favorite quotes from her, she says, God sometimes uses what He hates to accomplish what He loves. And I think that's very, very, very true.

And I've seen it in my own life. So, with every interruption, with every detour, every time our plans are thwarted, we actually have a choice. There's an opportunity there.

Do we continue trying to be our own little God of our own little life and living according to our own little plan? Or do we follow Mary's example?

[19 : 13] Are we willing to surrender control to the true God, to be lifted out of our little short-sighted plan, and to allow God to fit us into His grand design?

And are we willing to do that and then find out where that road leads? Surrender. Right? So, this Christmas, we really do have the opportunity to be changed and to grow and to be transformed, to become more the kind of people that we're called to be, the kind of people that we long to be.

First, friends, please recognize you have found favor with God. God delights in you. God loves you. God is for you. And God's grace is already at work in your life.

Second, we need an encounter with God. We need to pray. We need to ask God to make Himself known to us. We need to listen. We need to bring all of ourselves, all of our sin, all of our brokenness, bring that into God's presence and cry out for His mercy.

And then finally, we need to be willing to surrender to God. And listen, if that last part seems just too difficult because of what you're facing, if you're facing something where you say, it's impossible to trust God in the face of this, right, that's why we have Christmas.

[20 : 44] That's why we have Christmas. Because Christmas says that God loves you so much that He was willing to surrender everything to enter our world as a helpless child in order to give us life and set us free and restore this world.

And there is no one more worthy of our trust than Him. Let's pray. Lord, may this be so.

May it be in our lives according to Your Word. May we who long to know You, may we who long to be the people we were created to be, may we who long to survive and overcome the challenges that we currently face, may we find our rest and find our hope and our peace and our joy in You.

The God who became flesh, who dwelt among us, the God who in every way became like us so that one day we might in every way become like Him. Lord, we pray that You would bless us this morning and bless us as we go into Christmas.

And we pray that we would emerge through Your grace and through an encounter with You and by surrendering that we would emerge transformed. Lord, that we would bring You glory.

[22 : 06] We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.