

Marc Steele (7)

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Preacher: Deacon Marc Steele

[0:00] Father, we pray to you today that as we open your words and look at the life of your servant Mary, that we would follow in her example of faithfulness and obedience to the glory of your son Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. The first sermon I preached after my ordination was on the Feast of the Trinity, which is a fearsome occasion.

We've been kicking heretics out of the church now for two millennia over that issue. Part of the reason that's troublesome is because many of us bring in teaching from our past regarding the Trinity.

I actually did not find that experience to be as frightening as preparing today's sermon. I am going to say some things in the introduction that may upset your upbringing.

I certainly may say stuff that is going to upset my upbringing. I just ask that you be patient with me and let me get through the first page of my notes. Before you jump to any conclusions, I think you'll find I'm an equal opportunity offender as we work our way through this.

[1:31] This is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Tomorrow, kids, what do we celebrate? What's tomorrow? Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve, yes.

So this is the last day of our penitential season. Now, turning to today's text, if you open your Bible to Luke chapter 1. Growing up as an independent Baptist, the words, Hail Mary, full of grace, would send us into a fit.

Their utterance would cause a storm of fire and fury, the likes of which would rival some of Martin Luther's most passionate words.

But it wasn't until many years later, and it was a complete surprise, shock, made me question fundamental assumptions I had about Christianity, that I discovered that at least the first half of the prayer, Hail Mary, full of grace, was simply scripture.

It was the words of the angel Gabriel, Greetings Mary, or Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

[2:51] And then later on, the words of her cousin Elizabeth, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Yes, I know your translations look a little different in the particular text you probably have in front of you, but it's fair enough to say that that is more or less an accurate translation of the original.

And while we understand that Mary is not to be prayed to, that as the Holy Spirit himself tells us in the words of scripture, There is only one mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ, and elsewhere in the Bible that it is the Spirit which intercedes when we are anguished.

I fear that the typical Protestant overreaction to the adoration of Mary downplays her role so much that it hides the miracle of the Incarnation. There is nothing ordinary about Mary.

She is to be honored, admired, and copied. Why would we not want our children to copy Mary? Can you imagine the power of a generation of youth that take all of their hopes and plans for the future and humbly throw it down at the feet of their king for him to do with it as he wills?

I recognize that I am painting both Roman Catholics and Protestants, of who I am one, with a very broad brush.

[4:27] However, I'm doing so to make a point. And that's this. If you were to force me to choose one attitude between the two viewpoints, and I could only choose one, I would really struggle to make that choice.

So can I ask you this morning to set aside the Marian baggage of the tradition that you were raised in? Sit with me for this moment in time and explore God's revelation about Mary's character and testimony.

Mary is not a source of grace. Only God, our Creator, is. But Mary is a landmark of grace. For when the second person of the Godhead, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, took up flesh and dwelt among us, it is in her womb he arrived.

Mary is also not just an average person. Let me make an observation about Mary. On this issue of Mary, we struggle so much in how we regard her and how we speak of her.

But why? Why is this? We look back at Abraham, right? And we understand that he is the father of nations and that we are his heirs or sons and daughters in faith.

[5:57] We look back in David and see that the Christ is the offspring of Jesse. A shoot in a barren land.

We know that David was a man after God's own heart. But in both cases, we don't have problems calling these men our fathers in the faith. For the same reason, I have no problem calling Mary my mother in the faith.

We understand these special men did not earn the grace that was poured upon them, but it was poured upon them. And it flooded.

A blessing that would redeem the whole world from the curse of sin and restore peace between God and man. As we rightly revere Mary's patriarchs, we too are called to revere Mary because these special people mark the place and time God in his mercy demonstrated his love to the world. Also, my arguments aren't enough. We can't miss how the saints who lived alongside Mary regarded her. Besides the words of the angel Gabriel, we have the words of her cousin Elizabeth.

[7:20] Let's look at verses 42 here. So Elizabeth explained with a loud voice, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Verse 45, And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. Mary is declared as blessed because she marks the advent or the coming of the Lord to his people.

Mary carried within her her very God, the King of creation, Master of all, God in utero, the angst of days in the most vulnerable position, an unborn child.

Elizabeth recognized who her cousin carried within her. And John, also unborn, recognizes Jesus.

Verse 41, When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. You know, we have, when women are pregnant now, they have the pregnancy T-shirts, and they have the, there's the one that has the baby on board with the arrow to the stomach.

[8:47] And in a sense, Mary came with the baby on board T-shirt on, and John recognized who this special baby was.

How? I don't understand. This is such a mystery. We as modern Christians struggle with this idea of when a child becomes a Christian or expresses their faith.

But here, somehow, we see John still in Elizabeth's womb rejoicing in the presence of his Savior. I call that a demonstration of faith.

faith. But what is it that is the inciting incident or the trigger that makes John leap in the womb? Look at that verse 41.

It is the voice of Mary crying out to Elizabeth. It's Mary's greeting to Elizabeth that makes this happen. This is important because John will, in essence, take this up as his ministry.

[9:54] Before John wanders in the wilderness crying, Make straight the way of the Lord, it is Mary who first announces the Christ child.

In a sense, we see that from this point on in our text, as an unborn child to the point of his martyrdom, John the Baptist will follow the example set here by Mary.

Mary the evangelist. Mary the herald. Should the Lord bless me and I over the lifetime lead millions to Christ in my ministry, it still will be the smallest shadow of what Mary did.

Billy Graham and the stadiums he filled of people who converted and turned to Christ is just a drop in the bucket compared to the people, the many millions that Mary has pointed and led to Christ. And then we come to this prayer of Mary. For humans, it can take time for the reality of major life events to sink in.

[11:07] We can have a mental knowledge and a mental acceptance, but it takes time for us to accept it with our whole being. Now, if we had read early in the text, we would have seen the act of doubt from Zachariah, John's father, who also received an angelic herald.

Unlike Zachariah, Mary does believe in the messages from Gabriel. But when she finds another believing party in her cousin Elizabeth, she discovers a confidant to whom she can pour her heart out to.

We've had six children, so I've been down this path a few times before. And Corleen, unfortunately, was not feeling well, so she's not here.

So if I get this timeline wrong, she can correct me. Maybe we can give her an op-ed section in the next week's service. The mother knows about the pregnancy before the father.

They just know. I don't know how that happens, but they know. And that mental knowledge is not less real when she hides it. It doesn't feel real.

[12:27] Anybody that's had children, I don't know if you know what I'm talking about. It doesn't feel real. Even when she comes and shares it with me, it becomes this secret that we kind of have between ourselves.

The only time it really feels real is when we tell the other children and then share it with our families. It's only really at that point that we can start talking and discussing about what the implications of this pregnancy is.

You don't really start planning for the future when you're trying to keep the fact to yourself. I see this prayer as Mary coming to grips and finally having an opportunity to pour out the song that has been piling up in her heart.

She now finally can speak to somebody about what before she only privately knew. And how does one preach or explain the virgin birth?

It's the other thing with this text. The birthing and raising of a child has been designed by God to occur within the context of monogamous marriage.

[13:42] But here in today's text, a greater plan, one set forth by God before time began, occurs. Here, a godly mother faces a future where the father of her child is not her husband, yet all this occurred without sin.

While Mary stands righteous in this area, she still stands with the stigma and fear attached to single motherhood.

Granted, we know that she takes Joseph on as her husband later on. Joseph, a godly man. It doesn't occur without angelic intervention and there's a reason that that intervention had to come in. While Mary stands as a single mother, Mary and Jesus are not abandoned victims of a deadbeat father. What does Mary do in this song?

She turns to God, the father of all and the father of the child in her womb. So Mary burst forth in prayer and Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

[15:03] Credit where credit is due, right? When we open our prayers, we don't bless ourselves. Mary makes a big deal out of God.

in the process of magnifying the Lord, she makes herself smaller. As we will be told by John the Baptist a few years down the road, he, God, must increase.

We must decrease. In the middle of a frightening situation, Mary has made the bold choice in faith to take the heavenly messenger at his word.

Unlike Zachariah, the word of prophecy given to her becomes a source of joy because she knows. As a matter of fact, she embodies the hope given to her and her nation.

Verse 48, For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call Mary blessed.

[16:11] When we call Mary blessed, we're joining Elizabeth in the same exchange she had with Mary. Now, James, who is the half-brother of Jesus, will write later on in the New Testament that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

While he quotes directly from the Proverbs, one cannot help but think that in the back of his mind, he had the thoughts of his poor half-brother Jesus and the poor peasant mother from Nazareth. Because, come on, Mary is the very definition of a poor choice from man's perspective. What do we do today when we want to get a message out?

When we have a cause we take up or advocate? We find the most powerful people we can to endorse it. That's why Air Jordans are a thing, right?

Why not choose someone from Caesar's household? Maybe a family of the Sanhedrin. But here's Mary, dirt poor.

[17:24] She's not an Instagram trendsetter. She has no Twitter followers. She has no publishing platform. No book deal.

She has no power at all. That seems like a mission doomed to fail. Yet, what will we be celebrating on Tuesday?

From her body came our salvation. Truly, all generations will and have called her blessed. Christ. Verse 49, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Mary's smallness, her humility, recognizes the greatness of God in her life. The most dangerous place to be as a Christian is stuck in the delusion of self-reliance.

I've reminded, I've shared with members of leadership here, the past couple weeks have been a week of struggle for me in my secular job. I have an area, I work in retail, I won't go into the details, I don't think I'm even allowed to go into the details, but I have an area that in my little chunk of the world, I considered myself as a two weeks an expert in, for what that was worth, maybe one of the best in my small fields, and in the matter of four minutes an electronic intruder exposed me as a fraud and left me with a painful week of picking up the wreckage.

[19:09] And that really hurt, the time it took to fix it, pick it up, put it back together hurt, but you know what hurt me the most in that experience was I thought this was an area that I was an expert at, and I had been humiliated.

And that was more looking back and talking to my boss, who's also we were talking about humiliation hurt much more than the actual situation. But it gave me an awareness that in the last eight years I've had this position, this particular job, that this could have happened at any time, it could have happened repeatedly, I could have been put out of business.

I was reminded that maybe it wasn't the strength of Mark Steele that had anything to do with the success of the past eight years. That maybe it was God along the way who had been upholding me daily.

See, that was Zachariah's response. He just could not admit his weakness.

And I gave myself more of a Zachariah response in my situation. Had I been more like Mary to start, I would have recognized the strength of God in my life.

[20:42] It is the humility of Mary, and her full reliance on the strength of the Lord that will empower her to walk in holiness through her life ahead.

Because as we finish this prayer and we read the rest of these verses and if we hear her cries of victory, if we read as skeptics, we'll ask ourselves, what is this winning and victory she talks about? Is it found giving birth in a stable? Is it found as the holy family flees over the Sinai peninsula to Egypt to escape the massacre of the innocents?

the cross? Is it found 33 years later as she watches her bloody and beaten son die on a Roman cross? death?

A mother without faith would never find victory in these crises because they all demonstrate human weakness and failure.

[21:56] The eyes of faith see in the end of human strength, the beginning of God's deliverance. grace. And Mary's song of faith looks beyond even these dark days forward to the second coming of Jesus and the life of the world to come.

Verse 50, His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. As this song comes to an end, we see Mary rejoice not only in the first coming of Jesus, but at the second coming we eagerly await for now in 2018.

Mary's song now becomes our song. For the victory she proclaims we do not yet see. The mercy of Christ pours down from generation to generation in an ever wider and cascading flood catching up all tribes and nations, and we have not yet seen its end.

He has shown strength of His arm, He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

The prophet Isaiah writes, the beginning of Isaiah chapter 53, a messianic prophecy, prophecy, who has believed what He has heard from us?

[23:36] And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Mary has the answer.

Mary carries those two arms within her belly, still developing, not fully formed. Those feeble arms will reach for her body when hungry. They will grasp her finger as Jesus toddles looking for balance.

They will grow stronger as the son of a carpenter who labors. But here is the mystery of Christ. The physical presence of God who became man, Jesus whom we talked to and touched and handled. How do these strong arms show their strength? how does He scatter the proud and exalt the humble? How does He topple kingdoms?

How does He fill the hungry with the bread of life and irrigate dry hearts with endless streams of living water? He stretched out His arms of love on the hardwood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of His saving embrace?

[25 : 04] In this act of humility, the eternal Son of God deigning to become man, Jesus who did not equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

Therefore, God has exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.

Jesus can only cast down kingdoms and exalt the poor through His death on the cross and through His resurrection. resurrection. So we see in Jesus humility, we see in Mary humility, and we should seek in our own hearts humility as we approach God.

So in Mary we find a servant who marvels at the grace that has been bestowed upon her, as her body hosts and nourishes not only the great king, but also the great servant.

And on this final Sunday of Advent, on the eve of the eve of the Christmas feast, we marvel at the wife of Mary.

[26 : 33] Mary full of grace, whose womb was literally filled with the source of her grace. And we realize that Mary found salvation in that grace and in that grace alone.

As we read and hear a song, we realize that she found that salvation through faith. And that beautiful verse of scripture rings out, by grace are we saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the free gift of God.

And now together as a church, we wait to celebrate that most precious gift. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.