

Luke 1:26-56 "The Birth of Jesus Through the Eyes of Mary"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen. Thank you all so much. Amanda especially. It's a wonderful, powerful song. It really puts you there that first Christmas night, especially from Mary's perspective. It gives you a close-up view of Jesus' birth. That's my heart for us this Christmas, that we would get that kind of view, that we would really experience up close and personal this history-altering event, this life-changing, world-changing baby. That's what I mean by what Christmas means to me. Of course, that's a Stevie Wonder Christmas classic, but I don't mean it in some sort of new-agey, like you-can-have-Christmas-mean-whatever-you-want-it-to-mean-to-you kind of way.

I also don't mean for us to talk for several weeks about what Christmas means to Will, to me. That's not super helpful to you. But what I mean by it is I rather want each of us to be able to contemplate the impact of Christmas in our lives by considering its impact on real people, on those who were there in the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth, like Mary. As we've just seen from Delilah and acknowledged together this morning, some of us have different experiences with the holiday season in general. For some of us, holidays are hard.

If that's true for you, we'd love to know and be able to pray with you, care for you. There are men and women in the prayer room following the service this week and every week. They'd love to pray with you. If you just write your name down on one of the prayer cards in the pew in front of you and drop it in a box back there, one of the pastors will call you this week to pray with you. You don't have to explain. You can just tell us you'd like to pray sometime. And sometimes that can be distracting.

Those difficult emotions that we have can be distracting and they don't help us grasp the impact of Jesus' incarnation. I think I'm on record as being a little bit different personally.

[2 : 43] I'm a big fan of Christmas, right? You know, you've heard that from me more than once. I just show up this week and the church is being decorated like this and we start singing songs like this and I just love Christmas. I start to get this warm, fuzzy feeling. It's all full of sentiment and tradition, which is my personality. I just love that. In fact, it really threw me off this year when a stomach bug delayed our annual Christmas tree picking out trip, which happens during the Iron Bowl every year when nobody else is there. And it just threw everything off. I love to do things the same way. I could sing the same songs, eat the same food, watch the same shows, play the same games every year. Lighting candles at Christmas Eve just feels like Christmas to me. That's what we do. I love preaching about Christmas, all of it. And all those things can be good things and they can be helpful to my heart engaging with Christmas. They can. But if you're like me, sometimes I can allow my experience of Christmas to stop there with the sentimental warm feelings and traditions. And I've gone many Christmas seasons with it being nothing but sentiment and exhaustion. Where all it is is extra pressure to shop well and make all the parties. And many of my Christmas seasons, my heart has been there. Anybody else? Spent whole months perhaps with that being what all Christmas is. And that's not helpful either. That's why we're going to look at Christmas through the eyes of Mary and Joseph and the kings and the shepherds and others. See, for the characters in the Christmas story, that was not a problem for them. The birth of Jesus was not always positive, but it was way more than mere sentiment and tradition.

It was life-changing reality. They saw the extraordinary gift or the supreme disruption that Jesus' birth was.

Christmas is not to them just cute like it sometimes can be to me. Mary will help us see that it is the culmination of thousands of years of world history in one moment. Kingdoms clash. Worlds collide. Lives are turned upside down all because of this baby. All in that one moment.

Last thing I'll say about our series this Christmas season. Just like all the characters in this graphic, we will focus and have our attention turned toward Jesus. I'm not interested in learning with you merely a few facts about Mary and Joseph and so forth. The Bible gives us their stories to help us focus on Jesus, to help us see the glory of Jesus and grasp the impact of Jesus on real people like you and me. Understanding what Christmas means to them can help us consider what Christmas means for each of us. And that is one Christmas tradition I don't want to apologize for. I want all of us to have that regardless of what you feel about the sentimental stuff, whether it's painful or helpful or distracting to you. All of us need to consider the impact of the birth of Jesus on us.

So back to Mary today. I'll read you the beginning of her story in Luke chapter 1 verse 26. God's holy word.

[6 : 59] 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 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 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.

And 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. And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word, because what we need is to hear from you. And you've given it to us that we might hear your voice. And we might see our Savior.

[8 : 44] And that we might be forever changed. And so, Father, I need that this morning. We need that. Speak to all of us by your Spirit, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke famously tells us in chapter 2, that we haven't gotten to yet, after Jesus is born and angels and shepherds and all get involved, that Mary treasures up all these things and ponders them in her heart.

I've never been a new mom, but I've visited many a new mom in the hospital. A really amazing, special moment.

Many times just treasuring those special times. Overwhelmed with emotion. Dreaming sometimes of the future of this new child.

What will life be like now? Never the same, certainly. Many joys and struggles already starting within hours of birth.

[9 : 53] And Mary is similar to that. But even so much more than normal. This baby that she holds really will fulfill all of her longings.

For herself. For all God's people. And Mary, by that moment, knows that. And it's soaking all that in.

She's going to help us see, as she works through these months, that Christmas means God gracing the undeserving. Let's look at how that unfolds in Mary's story.

It starts, of course, as we just read, with an angel showing up to an ordinary teenager. In fact, you might even say Mary's less than ordinary.

She's really clear that she is no one special. Probably about 14, give or take a couple of years. Very poor, we find out later.

[10 : 58] And from nowhere, Nazareth. Look how Luke describes it to his readers. Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth.

Even then, many of them know where it was or what Nazareth was. Luke's saying it's like you're saying to someone, I'm from nowhere, Alabama. You know, it's this place where the closest town is.

Well, no, you probably haven't heard of that either. You haven't heard of Nazareth, Luke says. And if you have, it's probably because you know the saying, can anything good come from Nazareth?

That was a saying back then. So to this nobody from nowhere, the angel announces what? Grace!

Verse 28. Favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

[12 : 02] Favored one means graced one. Recipient of God's grace. God's special blessing and God's presence are promised to her.

You have found favor with God is again saying, God has graciously determined to bless you. That's the message Mary's getting. These words have often been misunderstood as talking about Mary's inherent greatness.

But Mary clearly knows better. The angel is emphasizing not her merit, but rather God's grace.

It's not so much Mary so full of grace that attracts God, but God so full of grace that he pours out on Mary, right?

Mary hasn't won a pageant. God has graced a peasant. Of course, so much so that she is indeed full of grace.

[13 : 05] She will bear the Son of God, the eternal King, the promised Messiah, the one they've all been waiting for. It's all a bit overwhelming and confusing to Mary, isn't it?

Can you blame her? Me? How? What the angel says troubles her. Perhaps she didn't feel much like a grand recipient of God's grace.

Suspects she felt pretty normal, even insignificant most days. Nonetheless, the angel tells this unsuspecting young girl that the person of greatest significance ever will come through you.

One of seeming insignificance. She says, me? A mother? How is that even possible? And the point is, nothing is impossible with God.

This is about something he's going to do. That this birth is going to prove that to you and everybody. That this chasm God will cross to reach all the way down to Mary will prove no one is beyond his reach.

[14 : 26] His grace will stop at nothing to reach the lowly. You need to know, Mary, that God is powerful and gracious enough to overcome your insignificance, your youthfulness, your life situation.

He rescues people because of his great power. And isn't this just like God? To condescend to Mary?

Isaiah tells us, God indeed is high and exalted, dwells in high places, but he meets with the lowly. He meets with young, undeserving Mary in Nazareth and gives her through Gabriel the message of grace and through his Holy Spirit the child of grace.

Perhaps even more humbly than you or I could have ever responded, Mary receives that grace. Verse 38, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. Boy, I need to learn a lot from her here. I'm not the hero.

[15 : 48] I'm not the focus. I'm the servant of the Lord. Whatever he says, I'll trust. Whatever he has planned is, I want to happen.

However he will use me, I'll be willing. And you can only imagine that there she is then, but the weight of what's happening, the glory of this, the magnitude of this pregnancy, this new role as mother of the Son of God, takes some time to settle in.

What's happening? What is God doing here? In fact, I don't have time to stop here this morning, but I love that the Holy Spirit starts opening Mary's eyes to what God is doing and the glory of this, that he uses Elizabeth, a woman probably three or four times Mary's age, to open Mary's eyes to what he's doing, to the glory of this, to encourage her faith in this gracious God.

God uses older women like that. Delilah does that for me when I talk to her. So do many of you.

If you think you're too old to encourage the faith of someone much younger to be instrumental in someone God loves, knowing his glory and greatness, you're not reading his story.

[17 : 24] If you think you've served your time and it's time to take it easy, you're missing how God works and you're robbing others of that treasure. On the other hand, if you young people think you're too savvy, too busy to learn of God from someone much older, you're missing the beauty of how God works.

You're robbing yourselves and others of the treasure of the family of God. And Mary meets Elizabeth, hears words from God through Elizabeth, and look what Elizabeth prompts in Mary.

It's one of the great songs of praise of all time. Bach calls it the Magnificat. And Mary shows us the glorious vision of God through this baby, gracing not merely one undeserving person, but truly a myriad of undeserving people.

Listen to it. It's beautiful. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. This is her story, Mary's story, how God has graced undeserving me.

[18 : 48] And then, and then Mary turns and invites all of us into the same experience of God that she's had in this unique way. Verse 50, And his mercy is for, not just me, for those who fear him from generation to generation.

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

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his offspring forever.

God, gracing the undeserving. It's not new with Mary, is it? In fact, Mary says this goes all the way back to Abraham.

The gracing of the undeserving is so much of who God is that it's what he's been doing for thousands of years with all sorts of people leading up to this moment, this climax of the whole thing through this baby in my womb.

[20 : 05] He faithfully makes promises and now fulfills those promises, and he does it in such a way that you can't miss that he graces the undeserving, that he meets the lowly, that he treasures the insignificant.

Commentator James Edwards says it this way about the Magnificat. It's beautiful. He says, It is a hymn not of the proud, but of the powerless. Not of just desserts, but of unexpected grace.

Not of a world fully controlled and determined by human powers, but overturned by divine comedy. He continues, God does not turn away from want and oppression, but toward both in compassion and rescuing intervention.

I love this part. In most religions, a meeting with God requires the low to ascend high, sinners to become saints. The Magnificat reverses all protocol and expectations.

God, who is high, becomes low. God, who is high, becomes low. Yes.

[21 : 23] Yes, that's what's going on here. Let me briefly show you how God does this in ways I think will meet our hearts where many of us are.

This great song that Mary gives us first, God notices. He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.

Most of us, most days, feel mostly ordinary. But if the God of the universe sees me, that changes things, doesn't it?

Have you ever felt invisible? Like, no one sees your situation? Like Mary in the middle of nowhere, like Israel in captivity day after day.

Does anyone realize how hard this is? Does no one else see how unfair this is? God does.

[22 : 31] God notices. God looks. God sees. Sending His Son confirms He has noticed us and our need.

because God never stops with merely looking and noticing. God also defends. He fights for us.

He pursues justice. He rights wrongs. Are you feeling vulnerable? Stuck in a bad spot? Powerless? Voiceless?

You can't change it. Maybe like Mary and the rest of Israel under the thumb of Roman oppression. unable to change much of anything about their lives.

Can't seem to find a godly leader anywhere around. He has scattered those proud in their hearts and brought down the mighty from their thrones.

[23 : 31] Those who wield authority that's not theirs. The bully at school. The manipulative friend. And those who unmercifully and abusively use the power that they rightfully have.

A parent, a politician, a boss, a preacher. All of them. Both kinds of high and powerful people God is taking down.

Why? Because He exalts the humble. they are the ones He fights for. The ones He defends.

And Jesus enters into this unjust world to turn things upside down and make them right again, doesn't He? The ordinarily insignificant are treasured and defended by Him.

Next, God satisfies. He has filled the hungry with good things. You ever feel empty? Be honest.

[24 : 44] No deep sense of purpose or fulfillment? Longing to be significant in some way that you feel like you ought to be?

Mary knew that and she found God to be the only one who satisfied her longings. We often try to fill ourselves other ways, don't we?

And Jesus comes because He knows we will keep coming up empty, chasing every other drug looking for satisfaction. He meets our deepest needs.

God satisfies the hungry. Finally, here, God delivers. He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy.

He actually keeps His promise to His people, not just makes it, He keeps it. Do you feel helpless somewhere?

[25 : 46] Maybe you feel you don't have what it takes to save your marriage. Maybe you feel like you want to give your kids some relief, but it's beyond you.

You can't help. Maybe you're confused about the next steps in life and you're exhausted from trying everything you can think of to try to regain control of things.

This is the grace of God coming to you. He not only notices, He not only defends, He not only satisfies, but He also fully and finally forever delivers.

He is faithful. Our Father knows what we need, yes, and He makes sure we get it. He's promised and He remembers His mercy.

Mary rejoices in this, doesn't it? That's why she's praising Him and we can too. Mary is telling us not merely that God is like this generally, but that He has done this actually in her life and through this baby is doing it for you and me for generations of people.

[27 : 03] God is coming through. This baby is the answer to all the hopelessness and confusion of people generation after generation.

I don't know in what way you feel undeserving of God, but that's where His grace shows up for you.

At Christmas, He enters in there, comes to us so that we don't have to climb the ladder ourselves, we don't have to figure ourselves out and get life straight.

He shows up to save so each of us can say, my soul magnifies the Lord. See, if you're a non-car guy like me, who barely knows where the gas goes in, and you're broken down on the side of the parkway and there's smoke coming out from under the hood, it's a nice thing to be able to call a friend and have a friend say, have you checked the starter?

What does it sound like when you turn the key? that's nice, but it's quite another thing altogether to have a friend say, where exactly are you?

[28 : 25] And then show up a few minutes later and crawl under the hood with you, right? If you've ever been lonely and hurting, you know, it's nice to hear a politician or preacher or teacher talk about caring for people, but it's quite another thing altogether to have one knock on your door, sit down and listen to your struggle for a while.

If you've ever felt life falling apart and spinning out of control, it's nice to have a friend say, I believe in you and hope you succeed. It's quite another thing altogether to have that friend show up and say, how can I help?

What can I pray for? How can I walk with you in this? I want you to go back to Mary as a new mother one last time. She's heard from an angel.

She's praised God in this beautiful song. She's given birth to the Son of God and now she sits holding her newborn and treasures up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

What does she see? uniquely her. Mary as his mother, she sees that God graces the undeserving by entering in, in our place, becoming like us, getting under the hood with us as it were.

[29 : 59] Think about it. As his mother, she swaddles him in a poor manger. she nurses him when he hungers.

She soothes him when he needs help. She sees better, I think, than anyone else, that God is not merely calling out from heaven that he cares for the undeserving, the weak, the insignificant, which would be nice to know, good information to have, but no, God is doing quite another thing altogether.

God has become like the weak and insignificant to deliver his grace to them. At Christmas, in a lowly manger, in too little Bethlehem, God declares once and for all, my grace will find you.

No matter what mess you're in, no matter how little you deserve it, it will find you. And you can count on it because he enters in and becomes like us there.

When God graces the undeserving, it is according to his promises. It is beyond and even at times against our expectations, but especially it is at great personal cost to himself.

[31 : 33] He doesn't pronounce grace from a distance. He enters in, becomes like us, sacrifices himself, takes our pain to bring us grace.

Jesus starts in the manger what he does when he goes to the cross, doesn't he? I'll take their place to bring them grace.

I'll be rejected for those who deserve to be. I'll suffer for those who've earned every bit of it. I'll die for those facing certain death so they can be welcomed, beloved, and live forever.

He comes into our place to bring us his grace. Praise God. May Christmas mean to you wherever you know you don't deserve it, that God loves you so much that he enters into your place that you might know his incredible grace for you.

Let's pray. Father, your love like that is amazing. the fact that in time and space and history you came and entered into the pains of this life for us.

[33 : 02] It's amazing. Thank you for how you love weak and lowly, ordinary people like us.

Thank you that the glory of your grace is such that you can share it with us, that your glory far surpasses anything we comprehend and that you invite us to be a part of it with you forever.

We don't deserve it. I guess that's why it's grace. And so we just thank you for it. We rejoice in Jesus. Amen.

For more information, visit us online. at southwood.org. Thank you.