

Prepare and Provide: If you remember nothing else from my message this morning, I want you to remember these two words: Prepare and Provide. How are you preparing yourself to provide a place for Jesus in your heart this Christmas season?

Childbirth is a special thing. It is truly a miracle, that God designed the reproduction of humankind in this specific way. Though not all women have children, which there is nothing wrong with that, we can all agree that there is something sacred in the process.

For those who have had children, you know that parenting doesn't begin at birth. As soon as mothers and fathers discover they are pregnant, they begin to prepare in different ways for their child, making decisions as to what kind of parents they will be, how they will provide for their baby, and how they would like to raise their child. Prepare and provide.

When thinking about preparation for childbirth, I wanted to get the inside scoop on how some women in the congregation experienced getting ready to have children for the very first time. This is what they had to say:

***Watch "Oak Grove Women Reflect" Video**

Christmas is a season centered on the birth of a child; Not just any child, but Jesus, the Son of God, who was being born to save the whole world. This was a special, one of a kind, never happened before and never to be done again event. Mary was a special mother, chosen by God. Yet at the same time, it was still very much a birth like women experienced thousands of years before and have experienced thousands of years after. Which got me thinking; what kind of preparation did Mary have to go through in order to give birth to Jesus?

If I were able to interview Mary, how might she answer those questions? Let's now watch the Call To Christmas Video for Mary and consider what it might have been like for her to receive the news and how she would prepare for what was to come.

***Watch "Call of Christmas" Mary Video:**

Mary said "yes" to God. But what did it mean for her to say yes? And what would it mean for us to say "yes" to God this season? We are going to consider this morning in saying "yes" to God, Mary was agreeing to prepare for Jesus' coming and provide a place for Him to be.

A. How did Mary prepare and provide?

1) How did she respond to the news that she was pregnant? Let's consider her circumstances. First, she was a virgin; according to human, scientific reasoning, it should have been physically impossible for her to conceive a child without having had sex. Secondly, she wasn't yet married to Joseph her fiancée, so social conventions would have said that the only way she could have gotten pregnant was to have had an affair. Finally, we know that she was a young girl, estimated to maybe be around 16 years old. Although I would suspect that people in her time matured at a much quicker rate than today, we can't

discount that she didn't necessarily have the experience and wisdom to deal with this news. And yet the angel called her "favored one." God had chosen Mary for a reason. So, how did she respond?

First, in v. 34, Mary asks the obvious and understandable question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" I can't imagine a more appropriate first question to ask. How can this possibly happen, everything I know about childbirth says that this is impossible?! The angel reveals to Mary that this is a gift from the Holy Spirit, and then points her to the miracle of her Cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, which also should have been impossible because of her old age. Mary was able to see that and recognize that God was already at work here in wondrous ways.

To me, it's not the first question that Mary asks that's surprising; it is her response to the Angel's explanation. After the angel speaks, Mary responds: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We don't know anything about Mary's life before this; but what we see is a young girl, who against all scientific and social conventions, declares that she is ready to receive Emmanuel, God with Us. She may not have fully understood what was happening or why, but she was ready to provide her own body to give birth to the Christ-child.

2) How did she prepare for Jesus' birth?

What we do know is that she spent 3 months with her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with her first child as well. Then, in Luke 2:1-7, Mary and Joseph traveled from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the census. When they arrived, though, it is clear that they did not plan in advance for where they would be having the baby. Many would have been coming into town to participate in the census, and v. 7 tells us that Mary gave birth to Jesus "and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Now, mothers, when you were thinking about where you were going to give birth, did you go plan ahead? Did you meet your doctor ahead of time and discuss what the day and time would look like? Did you visit hospitals? Even if you did a home birth, you probably knew ahead of time what room it would be in, who would be there, and what equipment you would need.

Because of circumstances and maybe inexperience, Mary had none of these things planned out. But that didn't matter. The most important preparation that she did was in her heart.

3) Who was around to support her and help her prepare for the birth of the Messiah?

Her support system was very different than what many of you may have experienced. We don't hear anything about Mary's mother or father helping her during this time. We know that Joseph was present at the birth. And we know that she spent three months with Elizabeth and Zechariah, during which time they surely talked about the miracles God had given them. Now, this was clearly an important and formative time for Mary in understanding God's plan for her because during it she offers this beautiful praise that sometimes gets called "The Magnificat" in Luke 1:46-55.

"My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for the Mighty

One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

What does Mary recognize during this time about God’s providence for her? She sees that even though she is basically the person least expected to be the mother of God, God gave her this favor anyways. And even though she might in the short term suffer disrespect and ridicule at the hands of friends and family because of being an unmarried pregnant woman, in the long run she would be remembered for her faithfulness. And she was also perceptive enough to see further than herself and recognized that what God was doing for the world through her. Mary saw that Emmanuel, God with Us, was coming to shake up the system and change the world, and so she **prepared** herself in order to **provide** a place for Him to live, both on Earth and in her heart.

B. How are we preparing ourselves for Emmanuel (God with Us)?

This whole season of Christmas is about celebrating the Good News, that God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not die but will have everlasting life. Christmas is the literal birth of this Good News, that God is not distant but that He is Emmanuel, God with Us.

So, how do we receive the Good News? Are we excited, nervous, stunned, panicked? Or, can we learn from Mary’s example and say, even though I may not fully understand or feel ready: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

How do we prepare our hearts for providing space for God this season? How much of the hustle and bustle Christmas activities of the season are centered on friends and family gatherings, Christmas movies, zoo lights, and shopping for that perfect Christmas gift? And how much time are we spending just thinking about this Good News and worshiping the God who sent us Jesus? Not to say that any of those other things are bad, in and of themselves; however if we spend the majority of our time immersed in the commercial side of this holiday, then we can easily miss out on preparing our hearts to provide a place for Jesus.

Who do we have around us to help in this preparatory time? Have we found ways to incorporate Christian activities into our family gatherings? Do we spend time with fellow church members sharing about what this Good News means to us? Do we make worship time a priority, even though we know there are about a million other things that we can be doing? Have we made time to serve others in our community, especially when so much of the season is centered on serving ourselves? I would encourage you to take time with your family and friends to celebrate Jesus’ Good News and in doing so prepare your hearts together to provide a space for Jesus.

C. What does it mean to say “yes” to God?

When Mary responded to the angel, she was saying “yes” to God. Yes God, I will do what you will for me, I will be who you need me to be, I will prepare and provide.

What does it mean for us to say “yes” to God this Christmas season? I suspect that practically, this will mean something different to every person in here. But we all begin in the same place: abandoning our will and desire for the will and desire of God. Think about this, Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. Her mind was probably consumed with planning for the wedding and thinking about what the future held. But then God broke in and challenged her to change her plans. She had to abandon everything she thought she knew about her future in order to provide space for God’s plans.

What would it mean for us to abandon ourselves, this season, to make space for God? During my devotional time this week, I came across this “Prayer of Abandonment” by Charles de Foucauld that I want to close with.

“Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you do I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, as in all your creatures, I ask no more than this, my Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you, O Lord, with all the love of my heart, for I love you, my God, and so need to give myself-to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve and with total confidence, for you are my Father.”