

Why a baby, why a virgin, why Mary?

“The Child in the Manger – The True Meaning of Christmas

December 24, 2017

Morning Service

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)

Last Sunday the title of my message was the “Gospel of Isaiah,” with the main theme being how the prophet Isaiah, who lived some 700 years before Jesus was even born in the manger, accurately prophesied what the coming Messiah was going to be like. It wasn’t that the Israelites weren’t expecting a coming Messiah, it’s that they were expecting the wrong kind of Messiah and that he wasn’t just coming for them, but for all people. The Messiah who was to come and what he was going to be like was revealed by God to Isaiah over time. First it was revealed to him that he would be born as a baby boy and that he would be born to a virgin. Not too many were expecting that! And then it was revealed to him that he would fulfill four important ministries entitled Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, that which we looked at last week. And over more time it was revealed to Isaiah that the Messiah to come would be a servant, and not just any servant but a suffering servant. The second half of Isaiah describes a Messiah who will be obedient to the father and yet experience deep suffering. These are the coming Messiah’s words as prophesied by Isaiah in 50:5-6:

*The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.*

Is this the same Messiah described earlier by Isaiah as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace? It would get worse:

*Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. . .*

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Not only will Immanuel be the child born of the virgin, not only will he be the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace, he will also be a suffering servant who will be chastised to bring us peace. Jesus was born to be all of this.

So, why a baby, why a virgin and why Mary? Well there is something very significant about all three of those roles. In fact there is something significant about everything having to do with Christ's birth in the manger and almost all of it points to a Messiah far different than what was expected. As I pointed out last Sunday, a feeble, vulnerable baby in a manger is far different than the great military figure that the Israelites were expecting and hoping for. Nazareth was one of the last places in the world that the Jewish people would have expected parents of their Messiah to be from, "nothing good comes from Nazareth." While Bethlehem was sure a lot better than Nazareth in the Jewish people's eyes, it really wasn't much of town in the day. It certainly was no Jerusalem! It would be like the Messiah being born in West Liberty, Ohio instead of New York City, with all its excitement, the glamour and lights.

Why a virgin? Well Jesus had to be both divine and human. He was Emmanuel, which means God with us, so he had to be conceived through the work of the Holy Spirit. A virgin represents innocence. The angel said, "the holy one to be born will be the Son of God." Hebrews 1:3 says this about the baby who was born in the manger, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

The baby in the manger was God in the flesh who embodied the exact representation of God the Father who conceived Jesus in the womb of Mary by the way of the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth of Jesus, God with us, conceived by the Holy Spirit is one of the central tenets of the Christian faith for almost all Christians throughout the world. The Apostle's Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

But then there was Jesus' humanness, that which was needed for him to experience everything that we experience as humans during our life here on earth: joys, sufferings, temptations to sin and even death. The only thing that Jesus didn't do that we human do is sin, and yet he would take the punishment of all our sin upon himself.

But this morning I would like to spend just a little time focusing on Mary. Why did God choose Mary? Well, for one she was a young virgin, but there were many young virgins available for God to pick from. For many years now I have joked that we really don't know whether Mary was the first one God chose to carry the Christ child, all we know is that she is the first one who said yes. But the truth is she is most likely the first one God did ask, because God knew exactly who he was asking and why? There were certain things unique to Mary's character that made her the right one for being Jesus' mother here on earth.

Each of us human beings is a combination of the personalities and characteristics of both our mother and our father. Just as much as there were attributes and characteristics in Jesus' life that displayed God, his Father, likewise there were attributes and characteristics of Jesus that can be credited to his mother. A son having attributes and characteristics of his mother does not make him any less male. Rather, it simply completes the design of who God created him to be, that includes the imprint and representation of his mother as one of his parents.

In the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life we find him dealing with people with compassion, patience, kindness and tenderness. Over and over again Jesus takes the time to value children, which just adds to the importance of the Messiah coming as a baby, showing just how much God values the lives of little children, as well as those living on the margins of life. Jesus often responded to those people with dignity, reaching out to them with appropriate and meaningful touch. We find ourselves in a society and culture today that seems to have lost that sense of appropriate touch. Mary, described by the angel of the Lord as one who has "found favor with God," must have displayed similar compassion, patience and tenderness in her own life as both a woman and as a mother.

If it is true that Jesus is that exact representation of God the Father, as it says in Hebrews 1:3, then we need to look throughout the entire Bible to see what God is like, and in a male dominated world we often overlook many of the descriptions of God in the Bible which include motherly language and imagery:

Like further along in the Book of Isaiah where we find the image of God comforting his people like a mother comforts her child:

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.
Isaiah 66:13

At another place in Isaiah, God is compared to a nursing mother who would never forget her child:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
Isaiah 49:15

In the gospel of Luke, when Jesus longs for the people of Jerusalem, he compares himself as a mother hen longing to gather her chicks under her wings:

"O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"
Luke 13:34

Those are just a sampling of the passages in the Bible that offer God in descriptions and images of God as a motherly figure. Because the Bible state that Jesus is the exact representation of God, those characteristics are true of Jesus as well. Where did Jesus learn those from? Many of the same characteristics that were true of Jesus, not only referred to in the Bible as "the Son of God," but also as "the son of Mary," had to be also true of Mary, his mother. Many of the same character traits of Jesus we find in Mary and vice-a-versa.

Both Mary and Jesus displayed strong courage and were willing to receive a mission that included great faith, hope and trust in their heavenly Father. When Mary received the mission from the angel of the Lord to conceive and carry the son of God in her womb, her response was, as translated in the ESV (Luke 1:38):

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Other version says, “may your will be done.” Those words of Mary are tremendously similar to the words of her son in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was praying for the strength and courage to complete the mission God had given him, to go to the cross to die for the sins of all humanity:

And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” Luke 22:41-42

The comparison of Jesus and his mother Mary continues.// Both Jesus and Mary lived lives of great consequence that included deep pain. Very few of us can escape our life here on earth without experiencing likewise. While Mary was promised by the angel Gabriel that her son Jesus would be the Messiah, the Savior of the world, what he didn’t tell her was exactly how that would be accomplished. Mary probably got her first clue when she and Jesus’ father, Joseph, presented Jesus at the temple shortly after his birth and the Holy man Simeon offered his blessing:

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Luke 2:34-35

It says in John 19:25 that “standing by the cross of Jesus was his mother . . .” At the cross Mary experienced as much humiliation, hurt and pain as her son, Jesus, just in a different way.

Mary is at the cross. Never would Jesus’ mother leave him nor forsake him, especially in his greatest hour of need. Likewise, one of the characteristics of Jesus is the one that reminds us of his continual presence with us as his followers. Jesus promised that “no matter what, he would be with us always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus, like his mother Mary, is with us in our darkest hours and our deepest pain. Likewise, God his Father told his followers, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

One of the most powerful scenes of compassion and care that we see mutually displayed in the lives of Mary and Jesus toward one another is at the cross. While Mary seeks to be near, comforting and supporting her son, Jesus reciprocates with the same compassion and care for his mother.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

John 19:26-27

What an incredible picture of love Jesus displayed toward his mother. At his deepest and darkest hour, while he hung there dying, he had the compassion to make sure she was going to be taken care of in his absence, the same love and compassion that he had received from her throughout his life here on earth. The same love and compassion that helps us to complete our understanding of the meaning of the baby in the manger, and the question, “what child is this?” He would be the one who loved others and loved his family to the very end. At the manger we see the importance of family and the need for both a mother and father raising a child. What child is this is the child he would grow to be. He was unselfish and sacrificing beyond measure. He was kind and compassionate, extending mercy up to the very end, experiencing pain in the worst possible way. He was the one who came willingly to go through the worst, so that we too might become family, accepting the provision through his life, his death, and his resurrection. The child in the manger, that which we celebrate each Christmas, means absolutely nothing without the child’s death and resurrection later in his life. For not only was this child the one who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, he also would be the first born from the dead. And his re-birth gives all people the opportunity to be born again and saved from our sins, just as Mary came to understand:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his
descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” Luke 1:46-55*

Why Mary? Because Mary was the one who could allow herself to be humble enough to let all of herself go and to allow the Christ child to be born in her, the same thing that God asks of everyone of us, not just on Christmas day but every day of the year.