

Good morning. Today we are continuing in our sermon series, The Characters of Christmas. We have looked at the Christmas narrative through the lens of the prophet Isaiah, through Herod, through the shepherds, and now we turn the page to take a fresh look at Mary, the mother of Jesus. You know, I pride myself on being a fairly relatable person. I get along with most people. I can see lots of different perspectives, understand where people are coming from. But Mary? Her life, her experiences....well, it's a hard one to wrap my mind around. Mothers in the room, I don't know where you were when you discovered or received the news you were expecting a baby. Chances are you were in the bathroom or perhaps at a doctor's office. You know, chances are you had some sort of inclination you were expecting, some sort of idea that the pregnancy test just might show a second pink line. Chances are you were not a virgin when an angel suddenly appeared in your room and said, "Greetings! The Lord has chosen you, and you will soon give birth to the Son of God." I doubt that's how your story went, and I don't know about you but that's just a hard one to wrap my head around. To know and understand how that young teenage girl must have felt. Because it is not only an unplanned pregnancy. It is not only that she is virgin. It is not only that an angel is standing in her room. It is that she will carry the Son of God, the promised Messiah, Israel's long-awaited deliverer will come through her. The baby in her womb will break centuries of silence between God and His people. God's redemptive work through Mary...its mind boggling....it's awe inspiring....it leaves us in wonder and amazement at the sheer power and love and sovereignty and creativity of our God. And I pray in the next few moments, in our time together this morning, we might see

ourselves in Mary's story. That a story and an experience that may seem rather foreign to us...well that it might become a bit more familiar. Because hear me this morning, do not miss this...**God's redemptive work through Mary is replicated in God's church,** in us, in you and in me. The entire biblical narrative centers around and points toward Jesus. He is the focus. Everyone else is just sort of side characters in this grand narrative that is unfolding of God's redemptive work. And so, many of them we don't know a lot about their lives, about their stories and their backgrounds. But if Mary could stand in this room today and tell her story, I wonder what she would say. I wonder what she would want us to hear. And so, this morning as different as this might be, I want us to try to hear her voice, to hear her perspective, and to perhaps discover how our own story intersects with hers.

Lights dim in congregation and stage lights come on for Mary 1st person monologue

It's amazing. It is totally and completely amazing what we are witnessing. I know, you would think by now nothing would amaze me. Nothing would surprise me. You would think by now I had seen it all. These eyes of mine have seen so many things. I mean I have seen an angel appear in my room and say, "Guess what, Mary? You are carrying the Son of God." I have seen the deaf healed and the blind see and the lame walk and the sick healed. I have seen my own son, that very baby I carried in my womb beaten beyond recognition, nailed to a cross like some sort of beast and yet even in his pain, even in his agony, he thought of me....he took care of me....and made

sure his friend, John, would look after me. I have seen that same Jesus defeat death and rise from the grave. I have seen him ascend to the Father. So again, why do these things continue to amaze me?

It is happening. Just as he said it would, it is happening. The Holy Spirit of God has come. Oh my, how the stories are pouring in. I have never seen a movement of the Spirit like this in all my lifetime. It is not just individuals or prophets or kings or judges who are receiving the Holy Spirit, but it is all people who confess Jesus is Lord. It is Jews and Gentiles alike. It is even the Samaritans if you can believe that. The miracles haven't stopped. They haven't ceased. The work hasn't stalled since Jesus ascended to the Father, but by the power of the Holy Spirit God continues to be active and alive and present with His people. The gospel continues to go forth. The good news of Jesus Christ continues to transform lives.

You know, I can't help but be reminded of that day Jesus came home for the first time after being gone awhile. It was the Sabbath, and so he of course went into the synagogue. He took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and began reading, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And you know, in the beginning, I was so frustrated with him for having to go on to say, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Oh, the looks I got from the women in town...the snide remarks. "Oh Mary, that boy of yours must really think he is something!" They'd say,

“Seems like all he is is a blasphemer or a crazy man at best!” But God’s Spirit truly was on him, and now that good news for the poor and oppressed and broken and blind is being proclaimed all throughout Judea.

It is happening just as he said it would. He told his apostles, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”** Seeing his words become reality, seeing this all unfold, well there is just nothing like that. There is nothing in all the world like seeing God’s Spirit come on another person, seeing God’s Spirit inhabit them and completely transform their identity and way of seeing the world.

I remember when the Holy Spirit first came upon me. I don’t know if you have ever seen an angel before, but trust me, it’ll scare you to death. I remember he said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Me? Highly favored? I was a peasant girl from Nazareth. Nazareth is a small, poor village in Galilee. Trust me when I say, nothing of significance....nothing of importance....nothing that falls into the category of “highly favored” ever happened in Nazareth. But the angel went on to say, **“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever, his kingdom will never end.”** Well of course I asked, “How can this be? How can this happen since I am a virgin? And the angel answered, **“The Holy Spirit**

will come on you, and the power of the Most High God will overshadow you. This holy child will be called the Son of God.”

I think the angel must have noticed my sheer shock and disbelief because he was quick to mention how even my cousin, Elizabeth, was going to have a baby in her old age. We all thought she couldn't conceive, but here she was already in her 6th month of pregnancy. And then the angel spoke these final words to me. I will never forget them as long as I live. He said, **“No word from God will ever fail.”** Oh, how I clung to those words. When I heard the whispers and saw the stares, I repeated “No word from my God will ever fail.” When I was afraid to tell Joseph, afraid of how he might respond, afraid of what he might do, afraid that he would have me stoned, I declared in my spirit, “No word from my God will ever fail.” When Joseph planned to divorce me quietly, when I had to consider if I could raise a child alone, raise the Son of God alone, again it came to me....no word from my God will ever fail. Don't believe me? Don't believe the angel? Consider Abraham or Issac or Jacob. Consider Moses when he fled Egypt. Consider Joshua when he watched Jericho crumble. Consider Rahab when she was spared or Ruth when she was redeemed. Consider David and how all these centuries later we are seeing the establishment of his forever kingdom. Mark my words and here me when I say, “No word from God will ever fail.”

You might be like me and need to speak that, need to declare that over a situation you are facing. There are so many things that fail in this world....people, plans, marriages, health. There are times we cannot see the way forward. Times we

don't understand. Times we lay awake at night and wonder if we heard God right, wonder if it was God we even heard in the first place or simply our own inner voice or imagination. There are times when grief is crippling, times when doubt is paralyzing, times when the uncertainty of life feels like it just might swallow us whole. Yet, no word from God will ever fail. Rest in that. Believe that. Say it, sing it, shout it. Whatever you've got to do to allow it to sink in. May you know down deep in your bones that the word of God does not fail.

And don't just take my word for it. You can ask Elizabeth. You remember her. I mentioned her just a moment ago. She's my cousin, you know the one the angel said would give birth to a child even in her old age. I remember when the angel left me, I just knew I had to see Elizabeth. If there was anyone who could remotely understand what I was going through, it was her. After all, here we were both with rather unusual pregnancies. I hurried off to her house and when she heard my greeting the baby leaped for joy in her womb, and dear sweet Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. I mean can you imagine? A baby, not yet born, leaping for joy upon hearing my voice, recognizing and sensing that within my womb dwelt the hope of Israel, the hope of the world, our long-awaited Messiah. It was all just too much to take in, too overwhelming what our Father had chosen me for, that within my body....within my womb grew our Savior....grew little legs and cheeks and muscles and organs, grew little hands and feet, the same ones that would later have spikes driven through them. I felt that my heart might burst and I exclaimed, **"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.”

I ended up staying with Elizabeth for about 3 months I'd say before I returned home. Her husband, Zechariah, was unable to speak during much of my stay which actually made things kind of nice. Gave us girls plenty of time to chat and catch up. We cooked and cleaned and got the house in order. We talked long into the night about our boys and all that God had in store for them. We just could not believe that of all the families on earth, our family was chosen to help write God's redemptive story, that we were making the way for Emmanuel. For so long we just felt like people walking in darkness. We wondered how long would it be? Wondered how long the silence would last? Wondered if the promised Messiah would ever come, if in our lifetime we would be able to see him and know him and yet here he was slowly but surely growing in my womb.

Isn't it incredible the things God invites us to be a part of? I mean Jesus could have entered our world in so many other ways. If God wanted it to be so, He could have just set him on the earth already full grown. Or he could have been born to a prominent family in a prominent place with immediate status and recognition. But He didn't. It is almost like God's world is upside down from the one we see. He chooses the one no one would choose. He does the thing no one would do. In His kingdom, the last will be first and the poor will be blessed and if you want to be great you have to become a servant. In Jesus' kingdom, we find life, we have and know abundant life by giving our life away. Our God can speak planets into motion, mountains into existence. He could do anything, accomplish everything with just a spoken word and yet he chooses the unlikeliest characters to help bring forth His will.

When it finally came time for Jesus to be born, I just held him in my arms, and I treasured and pondered that truth in my heart. So many things could have gone wrong that night. Childbirth is hard and scary and risky. Why did God choose this way? Why did He choose this night? Why did He choose me? And what happens now? What will his life be like? What will our lives be like? I pondered all these things, and while I didn't have many answers, I just treasured knowing I got to be a part of it.

For 9 months, the Son of God grew inside of me, and you know what? I pray he never stops. I pray he never stops growing in me, living through me. And no, I am not crazy. Trust me, this mama is fully aware I no longer have a tiny human camped out on

my bladder. But still, the fact remains that he continues to grow in me. He continues to live through me just as he does through all who confess him as Lord.

I just love seeing this movement of the Spirit. I love seeing the power of God on full display. Because once the Holy Spirit comes on you, you are no longer the same. It changes you. I guess kind of like how a baby changes you. Your life is no longer your own, and you no longer want it to be. Much will be required of you, but it pales in comparison to all you receive. Your identity is transformed. Your way of seeing the world is transformed. Your desires and goals and what you want out of life is transformed. I was once just a peasant girl from Nazareth, but once the Holy Spirit came on me and the power of God overshadowed me, I became a chosen woman full of purpose and strength and determination, a force for God in this world. What God did in me, He wants to do in all of us. He wants to grow in us. He wants to live through us. He wants us to give birth to new life.

Several decades ago, God's Spirit came upon my family as we helped prepare the way for the coming of the Son of God....my cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah, John, Joseph and me....we all had a part to play. And all these years later, the same is true. In fact, it is even better, because this time God's Spirit has been unleashed. It is being poured out on all people....men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile. Because guess what? He is coming again. He is coming again. But this next time, it won't just be some shepherds and fellow townspeople who get the memo. Everybody's going to know. There will be no denying, no mistaking that Emmanuel has returned. That our

God is with us. So may He grow in us. Slowly but surely, little by little, may he be formed in us. May he live in us, live through us. No matter how long it takes. No matter how long we wait. No word from our God will ever fail. May we all prepare the way for the coming of the Son of God.

(All lights go dark for a moment and then room lights come on as normal)

Well, welcome back to 2022. You are no longer in the 1st century. I'm Meredith again, not Mary. This is Abilene, not Israel. Biden is President. Charles III is King. And The Noel Diary is the top movie on Netflix. You're back in 2022.

Thank you so much for indulging me this morning as we did something a bit different. I certainly hope there were pieces of Mary's story that connected with you, resonated with you, that something hit you afresh. But if I could pick one thing, if I could choose just one concept or truth for you to grab ahold of this morning, it would be that Mary and us, we aren't that different. Because **God's redemptive work through Mary is replicated in God's church**....in us, in you and in me. Thousands of years ago, God inhabited a human. He lived in her. He grew in her. He dwelt in her. For 9 months, she was his home. Jesus entered the world through her, through this young woman. That is her story, and yet it our story as well. That mind boggling, awe-inspiring story, the one that leaves us in wonder and amazement at the sheer power and love and sovereignty and creativity of our God, that's our story too. Here me Church, God wants to inhabit you, your whole being. He wants to grow in you, live in

you, dwell in you. He wants to dwell in your mind, dwell in your heart. He wants to enter our world through you, through His Church.

Speaker and author, Jen Wilkin, writes in her book *None Like Him*, **“As Jesus’ parables murmured of a message deeper than harvests or homecomings, so his miracles murmured of a transformation deeper than the calming of tempest or the healing of disease. They pointed to the most dumbfounding miracle of all: the display of his power to transform the human heart from stone to flesh. That our hearts could be made a dwelling place more suitable for the Spirit of the Lord than a tabernacle or a temple is miraculous on a scale we cannot fathom. Sometimes I need my eyes reopened to the greatest display of God’s power I have ever witnessed: the transformation of my heart into his dwelling place.”** Do we believe that, Church? Or somewhere along the way have we lost our sense of wonder, our sense of amazement that God has chosen us? He has inhabited us. He has filled us. He has called us out and invited us to be part of His redemptive story.

You know, it is so easy for us to look Jesus’ birth narrative and think...goodness, that would have been incredible to be a part of. To be a shepherd when the sky was filled with heavenly hosts or Mary when at the sound of her voice John the Baptist leapt for joy in his mother’s womb or Elizabeth or Zechariah or Joseph or Anna or Simeon. I mean how incredible to be a part of that! And absolutely, it would have been a sight to see. But may we be filled with amazement still when we see someone give their life to Jesus, when we see a marriage restored, when we see a child adopted or a family

reunified. May we be filled with joy when we see generational cycles of abuse or poverty or addiction, when we see those cycles destroyed. May we feel honored, not obligated, but honored to walk alongside the hurting and to show hospitality to the lonely. The God of the universe has chosen us. He has inhabited us. He has called us. He has invited us to be a part of the greatest story ever told. Are you living like that's true? Are you living like that's something you believe? Our sermon series this Advent is called The Characters of Christmas. And I would ask you to consider, what kind of character are you? Are you a main character, a main player, in God's redemptive story? Are you advancing the plot, adding dialogue and actions to the story? Or are you more of a background character? You're seen but you aren't really doing anything. Or maybe you're waiting in the wings. Or maybe you're just too busy playing the lead role in your own story to be a part of anyone else's. This Christmas season, may we marvel and wonder and see what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- **How is God growing and being formed in you?**
- **When was the last time you marveled at something God did?**
- **Consider your role in God's story. What part is He calling you to play and what is holding you back?**