

THE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE – THE LORD’S HUMBLE SERVANT

Luke 1:26-38

December 4, 2022

During this Advent season – I want us to think about this question: “*What will my Christmas experience be like this year?*” Then, another question could be: “*How will I handle my Christmas experience?*” Every Christmas brings us new experiences, and at times new challenges, depending on what has happened over the last 12 months; so, the way we approach the Christmas season differs year-after-year; some years we may face Christmas with great expectations and joy, and other years possibly with sadness, or even dread. To help us face Christmas this year we are once again looking at the very first Christmas Experience, as we are trying to mesh together the events that took place 2000 years ago with the events that are taking place in our lives today – Christmas 2022!

As a review of last week’s message, on Jesus’ being born at the perfect time in history, consider these words from Dr. David Jeremiah from his book, “Why the Nativity”: “*An obscure teacher from a small town in an occupied nation in the Middle East changed the world after His death. On the Friday of his crucifixion, His followers largely abandoned him, yet within a generation, He was worshiped in many foreign countries, and then within three centuries, His faith was the official doctrine of the Roman Empire. And today, over 2 billion men, women, and children follow that same teacher who was put to death as a criminal. Jesus indeed came at the perfect time, but He also brought the perfect message. He brought hope and light in a world ruled by the sword. This teacher spoke of perfect peace in a world of violence and vengeance, speaking of loving one’s enemies. In a world of death, He offered the hope of new life, for now and for beyond the grave. The Romans dominated through the power of terror, lifting a cross that performed its deadly task with unimaginable pain, but Jesus accepted that cross, submitted himself to it, and lifted it high as a bridge from the grief of life on this earth to the joy of Heaven, and that bridge was available even to those who persecuted him. In the fullness of time, when His truth and love could spread with greatest impact, Jesus came to bring the most radical, and the most wonderful message that has ever been presented. What began in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem would redefine history – at the perfect time, and for all time!”*

Today, I want us to spend some time looking at the familiar story of a young Jewish girl by the name of Mary – who was chosen by God to bear the Messiah at this perfect time in world history. What I want us to specifically focus upon is this:

“Of all the young Jewish girls living in Israel at that time, why would God choose Mary for this divine calling? What was special about Mary?” When the angel Gabriel came to give Mary the news that she was chosen, the angel said this to her: ***“Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you”*** (Luke 1:28). The NKJV also adds, ***“Blessed are you among women.”*** As we look at Mary’s story, it’s important for us to know that this version of the Christmas story is written by the Gentile historian, Luke, who would have heard this account directly from Mary’s own lips; Luke would have definitely interviewed Mary, and being a good historian wanted to tell her story accurately. It is well known that Luke wrote his Gospel, from the accounts of the many eyewitnesses who knew Jesus and walked this earth with Jesus and were still around to tell their part of Jesus’ story. So, as we read the Gospel of Luke, we need to understand that these stories are not second hand legends, or made-up fairy tales, but are actual eyewitness accounts!

Mary tells Luke that when the angel appeared to her and told her that she was ***“highly favoured”*** – she was taken aback and greatly troubled, wondering what kind of greeting this would be. We can’t be sure why Mary was troubled over this heavenly encounter, and we’re also never told much about Mary’s disposition and character; however, we can only guess what kind of girl she was – humble, patient, kind, and loving would have been a few of the qualities that would come to mind. One thing that I find significant about this encounter is that Mary never expected this encounter to take place – Mary wasn’t this great saint, sitting around with a halo around her head, as portrayed in those early works of art, expecting God to show up at any moment and give her a reward for being such a wonderful saintly Jewish girl.

I highly suspect that Mary was very normal in every way – going about her daily duties and chores around the house – when God suddenly showed up and turned her whole world upside-down! This encounter tells me that God finds favour with someone who is going through normal everyday life, trying to do the best they can in serving Him and serving others in their daily routines. I believe that Mary was someone that we would find working behind the scenes, someone that didn’t want to be in the limelight, someone that didn’t look for recognition or honour or favour, someone who blended in with the crowd; however, God saw Mary’s heart, a heart that was open and ready to obediently serve God, regardless how difficult and challenging the task may be!

Luke's story tells me that when God finds favour with someone, it's because they have a specific role to play in His plans for mankind, and it's not necessarily because they are a highly gifted or educated person or influential in some way. God uses them because they are faithful and obedient in humbly serving God right where they have been placed and in what they are currently doing. The Bible is filled with numerous examples of how God used very ordinary people like you and me to do extraordinary things for Him, and the trait He is looking for is humility, someone who makes themselves available to be used by Him. Some are called when they are young like Mary (14-16), and some are called when they are old like Moses (80). Age is not a barrier to God using us, we just need to be ready to say YES to God at any age or stage of life. God doesn't look at the outward appearance, He looks at the heart!

The angel reassures Mary that he has been sent by God on a very special task – once again telling her that she has found special favour with God, and she has been chosen to do something that will change the history of the world. The angel tells Mary the very specific task that God has chosen for her in **Luke 1:31-33**, ***"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will 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."*** Every birth is a miracle; however, this birth will require an extraordinary miracle, something only God can do. Something to fulfill Scripture, ***"Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel."*** A virgin will conceive and bear a son, but not just any ordinary son, but the Son of God!

At this point – I wonder if Mary was thinking that this angel needs to be told the story of the birds and the bees, so Mary decides to give this angel a biology lesson, ***"How will this be...since I am a virgin?"*** Well, it turns out that the angel is not that out of touch after all, reminding Mary that God is the Creator of all things. If God has the power to create this earth and the entire universe by the power of His Holy Spirit, then it would be no problem for Him to have a virgin become pregnant and bear a son. So, the angel reminds Mary of Creator God's great power, that nothing is impossible with God. **Luke 1:35**, ***"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."*** And, that's not the only miraculous birth that will take place during this first Christmas, as the angel continues to give Mary the Good News of her elderly relative, the wife of the priest Zechariah, ***"Even Elizabeth***

your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who is said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail” (verses 36-37). God’s promises are real promises – they will come to pass. Again, nothing is impossible with God. God’s power makes the impossible, possible. We can’t limit God! God’s arm is not too short! So, when God chooses someone for His purposes, He can make it happen, causing the impossible to become possible, and all He needs is from us is to say YES!

You may have thought that Mary had no choice in this matter – God ordained it, and it was so! However, the Bible is very clear that God created people with the freedom to choose for Him or against Him, to follow Him or not follow Him. We need to notice that Gabriel only came to announce God’s plan, not to command or force Mary to cooperate. It may be possible that Mary wasn’t the first Jewish teenager that the Angel Gabriel approached, there may have been others that said NO. Therefore, what makes this such a wonderful story is Mary’s response in **Luke 1:38**, *“I am the Lord’s servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.”* Mary said YES, and willingly accepts her assignment from God, knowing full well what great hardships this will bring not only to her, but also to her family, and to her fiancée Joseph. In Jewish society pregnancy out of wedlock was a big deal – a death sentence! This tells us that God’s favour can be very demanding, it could cause great hardships, separation, and division among our friends and within our families; we could lose our jobs, our standing in society, and our family may shun us or even try to kill us (Muslims converting to Christianity). When Mary received the news – of course she would be troubled, *“How can anyone possibly be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God?”*

Considering all the demands and challenges, Mary didn’t flee from doing God’s will – she didn’t seek an abortion or decide to give up the child for adoption. Instead, she embraces all of the demands placed upon her, fully understanding the great burden that it will put upon her, on Joseph, her family, and the shunning she will receive from the townsfolk. This story tells me that when God finds favour with us, it’s because He wants to use us for His purposes, and this always comes with significant demands on our time, our money, our lifestyle, and comfort level. The Christmas story tells me that when God calls us, we need to have the same response as Mary had, *“I am the Lord’s servant...May your words to me be fulfilled.”* In my personal experience, I have found that serving the Lord is not always easy, it can be demanding of your time, hard on your marriage and family,

plus frustrating and discouraging at times, as you are called to make certain sacrifices; however, it can also be extremely rewarding and fulfilling as well.

Whenever we read the story we also need to remember that Jesus came to this earth to die for our sins, and that means saying YES to God, Mary endured the heartbreak of watching her son suffer and die on that cruel Roman cross, and we can't be sure of whatever else Mary had to endure and go through during her entire life, being the mother of the Messiah; however, I am sure that she never regretted saying YES to God!

Speaking of my own struggles – one of the greatest problems with us, as believers, is our unwillingness to completely submit ourselves to God, making Him Lord of all. Sure, we will submit certain areas of our lives for certain periods of time, but fully submitting everything, as Mary did, is very rare in the lives of most believers. We don't always resist the devil and flee from him; we don't always come near to God, instead we often keep God at a distance, but then want Him to come near to us in our times of need; we don't always grieve and mourn over our sins, plus we tend to be double-minded (hypocrites), being one way around Christians on Sundays, and another way around the world from Monday to Saturday; and we especially don't like to humble ourselves before the Lord, giving Him complete control over every aspect of our lives!

As we experience Christmas 2022 – a young Jewish girl Mary has shown us what it means to be humble before the Lord, and possibly we all need to take some lessons from her to make it through another Christmas season. Mary modeled humility, and I believe that is why God called her the *“highly favoured one!”* In humility, Mary knew who she was, she knew that everything comes from God, especially our identity and our worth. We are Christ followers, not because of any good that we have done, it's only because of God's grace and mercy that we are worshipping here this morning. We are no better than others around us, so we can't take any credit for God's goodness in our lives, of His favour upon us – we just accept it and thank Him and praise Him for it. Mary could have taken the easy way out and said NO to God, which would have saved her from all that stress and heartache, especially seeing her Son suffer and die a humiliating death on the cross, but that's not what a humble person would do – when called by God. Only a proud self-centred person, full of themselves, would say NO to God's calling upon their lives! I'm too busy! I have a family to raise, bills to pay, a career, travel plans, retirement plans!

YES! Mary was humble – however, the best example for humility is Mary’s Son! Jesus is our ultimate model of humility – that’s what the Apostle Paul tells us in **Philippians 2:5-8**, *“Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had.”* And what was Jesus’ attitude? *“Though He was God...He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave.”* And that’s not all, *“He obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.”*

To help us understand Christ’s humility let’s look at **Luke 18 – The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**, a parable against those who are prideful, arrogant, and confident in their religious position with God, those who looked down on others, thinking they are more righteous, more spiritual, and thereby, closer to God. In this parable Jesus compared the attitude of two men, a prideful arrogant religious leader (who thinks he’s going to make it into heaven one day because of his good works and good behaviour), with a lowly tax collector (who comes humbly before God knowing that he is a sinner unworthy to be in God’s holy presence, who God is most likely angry with, so comes in humble repentance before a holy God). Jesus tells the crowd that both of these men came to the Temple to pray, and then tells the crowd how they prayed. The proud religious leader, with great show, arrogantly bragged about how great he was, listing all the good things he had done for God. While the tax collector came in reverence, standing at a distance, afraid to come too close to almighty God or even to look up to heaven, humbly asking God to have mercy on him, a sinner. Jesus point was that only the tax collector went home forgiven and restored back to God, summarizing the parable by saying: *“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”* (Luke 18:14).

The warning and promise found within this parable – is that only those who humble themselves will be exalted by God. Then, going back to **Philippians 2**, it was because of Christ’s humility that God exalted Him, as we read in **Philippians 2:9-11**, *“God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* The promise of God is that those who humble themselves will be exalted. God is still looking for humble servants like Mary, who are willing to pay any price to serve. Mary’s humble spirit drew the favour of God – telling us that God can only work through a humble person!

As believers – we all have a part to play in God’s story during this Advent season. Last week, we learned how to be a “*John the Baptist*” to those we come in contact with each-and-every day as we point others to Christ, who is “*the reason for the season.*” This week, we have learned that we need to become like “*God’s humble servant, Mary,*” having the very same humble nature as our Lord Jesus Christ, by not being arrogant, boastful, self-serving and prideful; instead, being a servant to others, quick to forgive, quick to restore, quick to be a peacemaker, and best of all quick to love and accept others as God loves and accepts them, and we do it all in humility!

As we move into communion – I would like us to reflect on **John 1:29**, “*The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*” – as we prepare to take Communion. God takes sin very seriously and the Old Testament book of Leviticus gives very specific instructions for what the Jewish priests were to do on the Day of Atonement, so that God would forgive the sins of the priest and the people. On that one day on the Jewish calendar, the high priest would stand before God to represent the people of God. The priest would sacrifice a young bull as well as a goat and sprinkle their blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant seven times for the forgiveness of their sins that year. The priests followed this practice once a year for generations until Jesus came as “*The Lamb of God*” who was the perfect sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The number seven is important because Jesus shed His blood seven times for the forgiveness of our sins, fulfilling the seven sprinklings of blood on the mercy seat by the high priest on the Day of Atonement:

1. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was in such agony for what He was about to face that His sweat became drops of blood – Christ’s first shedding of blood for the healing of our emotions.
2. At the high priest’s house Jesus was disfigured as His back was beaten with rods and His beard was ripped off, fulfilling prophecy (**Isaiah 50:6**, “*I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.*”) – Christ’s second shedding of blood is for the healing of our image, restoring our marred image back to the image of God.

3. A crown of thorns was placed on Jesus' head and the large thorns piercing His skull – Christ's third shedding of blood was for the healing of our minds, restoring our thinking to having the mind of Christ.
4. The Roman soldiers scourged Jesus with whips, leather strips embedded with metal balls and pieces of bone, that ripping off His flesh, fulfilling prophecy (**Isaiah 52:14**, "***His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.***") – Christ's fourth shedding of blood was for the healing of our bodies according to **Isaiah 53:5**, "***But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.***"
5. They pierced Jesus' hands with nails – Christ's fifth shedding of blood was so that the work of our hands would be accepted by Him.
6. They pierced Jesus' feet with nails – Christ's sixth shedding of blood was so that we might walk with Him, a walk of faith.
7. They pierced Jesus' side and a mixture of water and blood flowed out, fulfilling prophecy (**Zechariah 12:10**, "***And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.***") – water and blood represents birth – the flow of water and blood from Jesus' side represents our re-birth as children of God. Christ's final shedding of blood was the final blow to Satan and his kingdom, ushering us into eternity as the children of God – forgiven, restored and empowered to represent Him as Kingdom people!