

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Mary, Did You Know?

Sunday, December 23, 2018

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Luke 1:26-38

To me, the best thing about Christmas is the surprises. Brett Blair aptly states, “When else in life do you get to pile together 10, 20, 30, 40, and maybe even 50 surprises, and sit for an hour or so enjoying each surprise - one after another, surprise after surprise?” Who in here does not enjoy the look of wondrous surprise on a child’s face on Christmas morning? And who among us does not remember the rush of excitement we experienced when we were surprised on Christmas day with the best gift ever?

I will always remember the surprise I experienced the Christmas of 1984. That Christmas, I received one of the best gifts an American boy could receive. In the months leading up to Christmas, I had begged my parents for it, but they didn’t seem too keen on giving it to me. So, I had resigned myself to the fact that I was not going to get it. When I came down the stairs on Christmas morning, my doubts were confirmed. There was no gift that matched the size and shape of the one I wanted. Toward the end of our chaotic unwrapping session, I noticed a box hidden under other gifts. It had my name on it. I opened it up, and there was a note that read, “Go to the garage to see what this goes with!” In the box was a blue helmet! I ran to the garage door and opened it, and there it was in all of its glory: a bright blue, shiny Go-Cart! Surprise! I almost heard angels singing!

Christmas is all about surprises. In fact, Christmas began with a big surprise. Mary got the biggest surprise of her life when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that she would be pregnant with the Son of God! What could be more astonishing than that! Maybe “shocking” is a better word. After all, she was a virgin. She asked, “How can this be?” Surprise!

One of the most beautiful Christmas songs that describes the surprise that Mary received is only about 20 years old. It is called, “Mary, Did You Know?” It was written by a Christian musician named Mark Lowry. In 1984, he was asked to pen some words for his local church choir, so he wrote a poem that began like this, “Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?”

A few years later, guitarist Buddy Greene added a matching tune, thus a poignant song was created. “Mary, did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know when you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God?”

How could Mary know what was happening to her when the angel Gabriel came to her so long ago? She couldn’t. It was a complete surprise. Her cousin Elizabeth was just as surprised when she found out that Gabriel told her husband, Zechariah, that she was going to have a baby, despite her old age! Surprise! Later, Mary visited Elizabeth, and the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumped when they met. Imagine that meeting – a virgin carrying the Son of God and an older woman, unable to conceive, carrying John the Baptist! Oh, the surprises of God!

Christmas is about the joyous surprises of God. So, in the spirit of the surprise of Christmas, I want to open up a few Christmas surprises from Mary’s story.

Did You Know That God Desires to Birth Something New through You?

If there is one thing Mary’s surprise teaches us, it is that God loves to do extraordinary things through ordinary people. Mary was just a poor, Jewish, teenage girl. Based on life expectancy at the time, Mary was probably between the ages of 13 and 16. Mary didn’t have much experience in life. She was not sophisticated. Yet, God chose her to birth the Son of God.

I love the statements we find in this story when Gabriel visited Mary. Verse 29 says that Mary was “perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Well, that is the greatest understatement in the world. If an angel appeared to you, would “perplexed” be the best word to describe your reaction? After Gabriel explained to Mary that God had chosen her to birth the Son of God, she asked in verse 34, “How can this be?” In our vernacular, Mary asked, “Are you kidding me? Are you smoking funny grass?”

Many of us have the same reaction when God desires to birth something great through us. We are perplexed. We can’t bring ourselves to believe it. We are afraid. We have doubts. We have excuses. Matthew

Hartsfield says that too often we get stuck in a Luke 1:34 mindset – “How can this be?”

Maybe for a long time, God has been tugging on your heart to do an extraordinary thing, and you have been stuck in a Luke 1:34 lifestyle. God wants you, and all you can give God is your doubts and excuses. “I’m too old. I’m too young. I’m not smart enough. I’m not good enough. I’m not educated enough. I’m not experienced enough. How can this be?”

If that is where you are today, this is what I have to say to you: it is time to start “doubting your doubts and having faith in your faith!” It is time to believe in yourself and the God who made you! It is time to get the word “can’t” out of your vocabulary. It is time to move from a Luke 1:34 lifestyle to a Luke 1:38 lifestyle! It is time to move from “How can this be?” to “Here am I, a servant of the Lord, let it be according to God’s Word!”

This is what Mary did. She moved beyond her doubts and excuses and said “YES” to God! And aren’t we glad she did? She didn’t know much, but she knew God loved her and wanted to use her.

So, if you think your imperfections and insecurities disqualify you from being used by God, think again! What we learn from Mary is that God will bring all the power, all the people, all the plans together to accomplish what God puts on your heart! Don’t worry about how, when, or how much. That’s God job. Your job is to follow what God has put on your heart and to be available to God. Your job is to say yes. God will take care of the rest.

Don’t for a minute think that because you have a disease, have dyslexia, are divorced, are not eloquent, or fill in the blank that God cannot use you. Because he *can* and he *will*. The Bible proves it. And why is that? Because when we have a weakness, we have to rely on God, and that’s what God wants. He wants people who must rely on him! Most of all, when God works through our weakness, his power is on display!

Now I am going to tell you something which may surprise you, but it is the truth. I was a very shy kid. I couldn’t even look adults in the eye I was so shy. In fact, I really didn’t start to come out of my shell until I was well into my teens, and even then I was still a bit shy. The truth is, some of that shyness never really left me. I love to preach, but I am scared to death up here. My heart is racing a mile a minute right now!

When God called me at 19 to serve my first church as a licensed local pastor, I was clueless. And the thought of speaking in public terrified me. But God was calling me, and I couldn’t run away from God. So I did it. And I know my first sermon was the worst sermon in the history of preaching. But those people in that small country church were so patient, loving, and kind. They

loved me into being a preacher. And I will tell you this: In every church since then, in every decision, in every sermon, in every meeting, God has been with me every step of the way. God has never failed me, and God will never fail you.

God didn’t fail Mary either. Mary believed in herself and believed in her God, and she was used by God in a powerful way. What turned the key for Mary? What caused her to move from Luke 1:34 thinking to Luke 1:38 thinking? I believe it was what the angel Gabriel said to Mary in verse 37, “For nothing is impossible with God!”

Did You Know That Nothing Is Impossible With God?

Mary knew this. Mary believed this. Otherwise, she could not have done what she did. Imagine the fears and doubts she had to overcome. We sit here comfortably, knowing the rest of the story. But Mary had no idea what was going to happen.

All Mary knew were the risks. For example, can you imagine how Joseph reacted when Mary told him that she was pregnant with the Son of God? “Sure, Mary. Pregnant by the Holy Spirit?” In fact, Joseph was making plans to get the heck out of Dodge until God got a hold of him. What’s more is that Mary knew that she risked being ostracized by her family and community. She risked rejection. She risked being humiliated.

Yet, knowing all that, risking all that, Mary said yes to God because she believed that nothing was impossible with God! She believed God would do what he said He would do! And she was blessed.

You want to know how to get blessed by God? You want to know how to be used by God for a great purpose? It is revealed in verse 45 of Luke 1. Elizabeth said to Mary, “And blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Hartsfield tells us to notice what Elizabeth did *not* say. She did not say, “Mary, you are blessed because you come from the right family. Mary, you are blessed because you are beautiful. Mary, you are blessed because you are intelligent. Mary, you are blessed because you are sophisticated.” No! Mary was blessed because she believed God would do what He said He would do (“Making a List”). You see, Mary did not know what her future held, but she knew Who held her future.

God does not bless us because of our *ability*; God blesses us because of our *availability*. We see this confirmed throughout the Bible. “Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was

immoral, David had family problems and personal sins, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, Zaccheus was unpopular, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. And yet, God used each of them in His service. He didn't call them because they were super capable. He called them and blessed the world through them because they were willing and available" (quote by Rev. David Miller). Let me ask you this morning: are you willing? Are you available?

God blesses and uses us to the fullest when we say, "Lord, I make myself available to you. Use me however You want to use me. Do Your will in my life. I will do the possible. You do the impossible, Lord!"

You see, Mary got this. Mary got that it wasn't about her. It was about what God could do through her. This is revealed in the greatest Christmas carol ever written. Now, think for a moment. What do you think is the greatest Christmas carol ever written? "Silent Night?" "Joy to the World?" "White Christmas?" "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?" John Ortberg reminds us that the greatest Christmas carol was written by a Jewish peasant girl named Mary over 2,000 years ago. It is called "The Magnificat." It is the beautiful words she pours forth to God beginning in verse 46. Be sure you read it. In "The Magnificat," all Mary can do is talk about what God has done.

When we stop thinking about our limitations and begin *believing* in what God can do through us, life begins to open up for us. When we stop trying to control our lives and say, "God, you take it from here," real life begins.

Did You Know That God Takes Notice of You?

There is a touching verse in "The Magnificat." It is verse 48. Mary said, "For He has looked with favor on the lowliness of His servant." Other translations say, "He has been mindful." The one I like the best, which I believe best describes Mary's experience, is "He has taken notice." Can't you feel Mary's emotion? "God, you have taken notice of me – a poor teenage girl. You have taken notice of me."

If there is one consistent theme throughout the Bible, it is that God loves us and takes notice of each of us. Now, that sounds simple enough, but you would not believe how difficult it is to convince people that it is true. As a preacher, I hear so many myths about God. When I am on the golf course, and people find out I am a preacher, they will give me a four-foot putt and say things like, "Be sure to say a good word about me to the man upstairs. I'd like to get into heaven. I have been a

bad boy." Or they will say, "You seem nice, but I could never go to church. Lightning would strike."

What does John 3:16 say? Does it say, "God so loved the perfect people?" Does it say, "God so loved the religious people?" No! It says, "For God so loved the WORLD!" Receive God's love today. God takes notice of you.

I love something that author Max Lucado wrote in one of his books. "It is unfortunate that most of us see ourselves as a composite of all our failures," writes Lucado. "When we look in the mirror, we may only see our failures. Even though many of us can't see beyond the failures, this is not the way God views us. As a loving God, He looks past our failures. Can you imagine a loving parent introducing their children by saying, 'This is my daughter Meagan, who stained the carpet with grape juice when she was two,' or 'This is my son Myles, who broke a valuable vase last week.' If loving parents don't have a need to memorize their children's failures, you can rest assured our loving heavenly Father has no use for such memories either."

God takes notice of you and cares for you. What do we think Christmas is all about? Love came down at Christmas to show each of us that God takes notice of us and wants to be in our lives. God wants to redeem us with His grace, encourage us with His love, guide us with His wisdom, and use us with His power.

Don't listen to your doubts. Don't listen to what the critics say. Listen to what God says about you and what God wants to do through you. No one ever did anything great for God by listening to criticism.

A few years ago, I heard a speaker at a conference tell a powerful story. He was golfing one day with some friends when the cart girl came around and asked if they wanted refreshments. The speaker said he had a golf shirt on with the church's name and logo on it. She said, "I see the name of the church on your shirt. You go to that church?" He said, "Well, yes, I sure do. In fact, I'm the pastor." They struck up a little conversation while she was getting their Gatorade. He asked, "Do you enjoy your job?" She said, "Not really. Old men flirt with me all day, and they get drunk and say nasty things to me, but I can't find another job, and it pays the bills." It seemed she wanted to talk more, but golfers were waiting behind them.

After the round, he saw the cart girl next to the clubhouse replenishing her cart. She approached him and said, "Well, I don't why I am telling you this, but you're a pastor and you seem nice. I've been married twice. I'm a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. I have been arrested twice for drug possession. I drank so much I lost custody of my kids. I'm better now, but I am miserable without my kids. I'm involved with a guy who is into drugs, and I don't want that life anymore. I want

something better, something more for my life. It's funny that I met you because I have been thinking about going to church. I think it would be good for me. I'm wondering, do you think I would be welcome in your church? You know, even knowing the things I have done?" He said, "Of course you are welcome at our church! In fact, you have my personal invitation to join us this Sunday. Why don't you sit with my wife?" And you know what? She was in church the next Sunday, and the next, and the next. Last I heard, she had entered the ministry?

Did you know that God wants to birth something new through you? Did you know that nothing is impossible with God? Did you know that God takes notice of you? I can't think of any greater gift we can receive at Christmas.

-This sermon was adapted from one of my previous sermons, "The Joy of Christmas" from my book *Mission Possible* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 2014).



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