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“Mary, the Favored”

Sermon Series: “Four Christmas Stories”

Sunday, December 9, 2007©

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Scripture Lesson: *Luke 1:26-38*

When the God of the cosmos lays a burden upon our shoulders we can say, “Let me be,” or we can say, “Let it be with me.” Would you pray with me please?

Lord God, we pray that these words of Yours would not simply fall upon deaf ears this morning. Fill our hearts, Lord, with your Spirit, remaking and shaping us in your image. We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was growing up we lived on a small acreage. “It was too small,” my Dad said, “to make any money but big enough to always have a weekend project.” My Dad usually involved me in those weekend projects; fixing a fence, or digging a drainage ditch, or moving rocks from one pile to another. Needless to say, this was not on my Saturday morning agenda as a young boy. My agenda was to watch cartoons, eat waffles, and lay around in my pajamas until 12:30. Still, most mornings, I would be drug outside to work in the blistering heat or the numbing cold. And it was always a little unclear to me what I was supposed to do. And whatever it was, I was not very good at it. I was sure that my Dad didn’t get any more work done with me around. In fact, given a calculator and a set of graphs, I could have proven mathematically my inefficiency to the entire operation. Yet my Father insisted on giving me a job most mornings, rather than just letting me live out my own agenda. God has a way of doing that too—not letting us simply live out our own agenda, but giving us a task which we do not want and for which we are

supremely unqualified. If you feel that way this morning, take heart, God has been doing this for a long time.

The physician Luke tells us that God sent the angel Gabriel to a little city in the district of Galilee to see a virgin who was betrothed to an ancestor of King David. Her name was Mary. Of course a lot of you will know this story. Gabriel came to Mary to tell her that, despite the fact that she had never known a man, she would conceive and bear a son. And what a Son! We all seem to have high expectations for our children, but this is simply off the charts—the Savior of the World. Gabriel says, “*He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*”
Luke 1:32-33

A person cannot not react to the news that you are having a child. But those reactions—depending upon the circumstances—may be profoundly different. That God has favored us to become a parent is usually incredibly joyous, even astounding news. However, if the child comes at a bad time, or is unexpected—the news can be unwelcome, even devastating. More than one family, or young man or woman, has sat in my office, weeping over the news that they were unexpectedly a mother or a father or a grandparent. During my freshman year of college a good friend called me to tell me that he had fathered a child with someone he barely knew. “My life is over, Eric, before it

has even started,” I remember him saying. “What am I going to do?”

If we read this story closely, I think Mary falls into this latter camp—unexcited and potentially devastated. Gabriel greeted Mary with what would seem like a very friendly, very uplifting greeting, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” *Luke 1:28* That’s nice, I think. But Luke goes on to say that Mary was not just troubled, but “greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what kind of greeting this might be.” *Luke 1:29* Mary was probably a teenager, but she was wise beyond her years. She knew this greeting meant trouble for her. Let’s draw an analogy here. Any husband worth his salt knows that if he wants to buy Orange Bowl tickets, or a new set of power tools, or a home theater system, he can’t simply just announce the fact to his wife. That’s insanity. There’s a method to these things. You have to prepare the ground with compliments and kudos, felicitation and flattery. Before anyone accuses me of sexism, I would say that the wives have the husbands beat at preparing the way. Men, we are suckers for a compliment.

When God gives us a task, He does not flatter us. He does not fill us with kudos and compliments. God prepares the way with His children by promising His presence. “The Lord is with you,” Gabriel told the teenage girl, Mary. When God called the old man Moses to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses objected, saying that he was not the man. And from the middle of the burning bush God promised, “But I will be with you.” *Exodus 3:12* When Joshua was commissioned to lead God’s people, the Lord promised, “I will be with you. I will not leave or forsake you.” *Joshua 1:5* And before Christ ascended to heaven, He charged His disciples to go into all the world, making disciples, baptizing believers and teaching them how to live and he said, “I am with you always to the end of the age.” *Matthew 28:20*

Mary knew that to be called by God and promised His presence, it meant He had a job for her to do—a job so difficult that she would not be able to do it alone. This is why she was troubled and wondered just what Gabriel’s greeting meant.

Of course that job was to bear, as a teenage unwed mother, and to raise to be a man, the Savior of the world. It goes without saying that Mary had a different agenda for her life. And I think when she asks Gabriel, “How will this be since I am virgin?” she is really saying, “God, are you sure about this plan?” This plan, without God, was a death sentence. The law stated very plainly that if a betrothed virgin lay with another man that both the woman and man would be stoned at the gates of the city. *Deuteronomy 22:23-24* This speaks to nothing of the shame, the collapse of her marriage to Joseph, and—even if she was able to work through all those obstacles—the great burden of being the mother of God, raising, as her own child, the one who was at the beginning when all things were made and without whom nothing which we can see, hear, taste or touch was made.

Mary did not ask for this. Mary, I strongly suspect, did not want this. God’s grace in our lives is that we do not choose our great struggles. We do not select those monumental tasks by which our name is made and God is glorified. God calls us to them. He selects us for them. Mark Galli put it this way, “God loves you and has a difficult plan for your life.”¹

By the way, I would like to clarify something this morning. There is a strong sentiment in the church that Mary was perfect; that she was somehow the very best person which humanity had to offer and that she earned the right to be the mother of God through her infallible character. The Bible does not teach that. Scripture does not teach us that Mary was perfect. What Scripture does teach is that God filled her with His grace. Why is this important? You do not have to be perfect, or even just pretty good, for God to call you. God calls sinners. God uses the imperfect, the flawed, the inadequate, the insufficient, the damaged and the deficient. In fact if we look at Jesus genealogy, we see that he descended from anything but a line of perfect people. Jesus’ human forbears were liars, cheats, stealers, confidence men, prostitutes, murderers, blasphemers, and even Oakland Raiders fans. Just to name a few. God’s power is made perfect in weakness. 2 *Corinthians 12:9*

God's grace in our life is that we do not choose our great struggles. We do not select those monumental tasks by which our name is made and God is glorified. God calls us to them. He selects us for them. And we are usually called—not to live out our strength, but to trust God in weakness.

Bob May worked as copy writer for the Montgomery Ward catalog. He had grown up small and weak and was a frequent target for bullies. He attended Dartmouth University and while many of his classmates had gone on to very prestigious careers, he did not. He lived in a small, dreary two bedroom apartment with his wife Evelyn and his daughter Barbara. For two years his wife Evelyn had struggled with cancer. Bob had spent all of their savings and gone deep into debt to pay for her treatments and medicines. At 33 years old Bob was depressed and deep in debt. His little daughter used to ask him why is Mommy so different and the only answer which he could come up with was a story about a Reindeer with a bright red nose named Rudolph, who although he was made fun of by all the other reindeer and left out of their games, saves Christmas one night by leading Santa's sled through the fog. His daughter Barbara squealed with delight at the story and asked her father to tell it to her every night. Bob decided to write it down as a poem and give it to his daughter as a Christmas present, not being able to afford anything else. But as he worked on the poem, his wife Evelyn succumbed to her cancer. Still Bob was determined to give his daughter a present and he finished the book.

After he gave his daughter her present, Bob was asked to go to an employee holiday party for his work. Encouraged by some other employees, he took the book and read it to everyone there. At first they laughed at the funny story, but then sat in silence and as the story finished burst into applause. Montgomery Ward put the story into book form and gave away millions of copies to children, and Rudolph became the most famous reindeer of all.

You may be sitting here this morning with a burden you did not choose, embroiled in a struggle not of your making, weighed down with an impossible task which you feel like exposes your every weakness and flaw. "*O favored one. The Lord is with you.*" He

has created you for a moment such as this and through it He is working His plan for your life. You may be wondering how this could be. You may, like Mary, have doubts and concerns about this burden, you may feel spectacularly, singly unqualified, dreading your own weakness. In *Luke 1:37*, we see Gabriel's words of assurance for Mary and they are as relevant to use today as they were to a virgin living 2,000 years ago in Galilee, "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" *Luke 1:37* God has created you for a moment such as this.

Last Wednesday afternoon Robert Hawkins, aged 19, walked into a department store at the Westroads Mall in Omaha with an AK-47, and for 30 minutes fired at random strangers, killing eight of them before taking his own life. In his suicide note, he wrote, "I've just snapped. I can't take this meaningless existence anymore. I've been a constant disappointment and that trend would have only continued."

Our lives cry out for meaning and purpose. Devoid of that purpose, we simply snap. Robert Hawkins spent the last four years of his life as a ward of the state of Nebraska receiving psychiatric evaluations and moving from drug abuse treatment centers, to group homes and foster care. The taxpayers spent \$265,000 trying to fix his life—trying to help him discover just where in this world he fit in. ²

Unfortunately we can't learn those kind of lessons from our government. The meaning of life cannot be legislated, voted on, ratified and bureaucratized.

What if the task we have been given as God's children is to show the world their purpose? I don't mean showing the world our purpose through answering the difficult questions of theology or even enforcing a moral code before all else, but I mean showing the world its God-ordained purpose through loving people in the name of Jesus Christ?

How do we do that?

The key moment in this story we are looking at today comes, I believe, toward the end—after Gabriel has told Mary precisely what her God-ordained task is to be. She is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will carry in her womb and be mother to

the Son of God and that of His kingdom there will be no end. And in an instant she realizes at least an inkling of what this means, she expresses her reservations, and wonders just how this will come to pass. But she is assured that God is with her and with Him nothing is impossible. The key moment comes when Mary tells Gabriel that she is prepared to trust God saying, “*Let it be with me according to your word.*”

We really have two choices when God lays a burden on our shoulders. We can attempt to throw it off and go on living the life we choose. Or we can realize that whatever it is God has given us to carry, we do not carry it alone. The God of the cosmos carries it with us. We can say “Lord, let me be.” Or we can say, “Let it be with me...” *Luke 1:38*

One Saturday morning, when I was about nine my Dad once again drug me out of the house, away from my agenda, away from the bucolic splendor of pajamas and waffles. We were fixing some barbed wire fence out on the north part of our property. My job consisted mainly of handing my Dad a tool when he asked for it. I could hear kids in the neighborhood behind us playing. I remember thinking how much I would rather be doing something else. “Dad,” I said, thinking I could talk my way out of this, “I don’t understand why I am out here. This job is pretty boring and it looks to me like you could just do it yourself. I can’t believe that there aren’t better things I could be doing with my time. And I just don’t know

why you insist on giving me these terrible jobs.” I remember that my Dad didn’t even stop pulling the barbed wire, didn’t even look up. “I give you these terrible jobs...” he said in between the grunts and the strains of pulling the wire tight, “...because I love you. And it’s the only time when I can have you all to myself.”

“*O favored one. The Lord is with you.*” Will you say “let me be,” or will you say “Let it be with me...?”

¹ Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006) p. 21

² “Mall Employee Gives 911 Dispatcher Horrific Account of Deadly Shooting At Mall,” by the Associated Press, December 7, 2007, found on Bostonherald.com.