

Last week we looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story; this morning we are going to look at the stories surrounding Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. In these stories there are a number of miracles that clamour for our attention—the immaculate conception, the angel choir singing to shepherds, and the appearance of a star in the heavens, announcing the birth of the newborn King.

But as I meditated on these stories this week, I was drawn to a miracle of another kind—one that took place within Mary and Joseph themselves. We are right to marvel at Mary’s pregnancy, at the angel choir, and the star, but we are not meant to miss the miracles of trust and surrender that we can see in Mary and Joseph.

On the whole, we are told very little about them. We don’t know what Mary and Joseph looked like, how old they were, or when they met. The biblical writers told these stories with a central aim in mind, namely, to call people to faith in Jesus—the Son of God—and that by believing in Him, people might find life in His name.¹ The implicit question, running throughout the Gospels, is this: *how will you respond to Jesus? Will you accept Him as Lord and God, or, will you reject Him?*

In these nativity stories, Mary and Joseph respond to God in faith and surrender. Time and time again, this couple trusted in what they couldn’t see—they staked their lives upon an unseen God, and they willingly surrendered to His plans and purposes.

I’m going to read the first of three texts, beginning with Luke 1:26-38, but first I want to introduce you to the central idea that will

run throughout my entire sermon. Here it is: **growing up requires a letting go, and letting go requires a trust in God.** Mary and Joseph provide us with an example to follow—what God did in them, He intends to do in us. Let’s now turn to Luke 1:26-38.

“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 favoured! 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 favour 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.”

¹ John 20:31.

It's not easy being a parent, particularly the first time around. A couple's ability to conceive, is not automatically accompanied by the ability to parent. No matter how often we hear that having a baby will change our lives, we don't really comprehend until it happens to us. Parenting is an exercise in trust and surrender—a growing parent is one who learns to let go.

What does a parent let go of? Here are a few of my favourite things: independence, freedom, money, sleep, and time. Speaking of **time**, before kids, getting out of the house and into the car took about two minutes—shoes, keys, wallet—but with young kids, it requires a strategic plan.

You've need to check the weather, make sure your child is wearing the right clothes, while packing along one change of clothes, preferably two. Then you need to think about how long you're going to be gone for—how much food do you need to bring along? The car seat is a must, and you can't forget the blanket, stuffed animal, or soother in case they get upset in the car. Then there's the stroller, playpen, and baby bag; once everything's in the car you're finally ready to go. The problem is that by the time you've got everything packed, it's almost time to come home.

What about **privacy**? That's one of the first things to go. For many young moms, 5 minutes of alone time is considered a luxury.

How about **control**? In my experience, parenting is a life-long expose on how much we crave control. I don't know what your control issues are, but I know you have them, just as I do. For some parents, it's about keeping the house clean and orderly. But what do you do when your infant starts spitting up, or throwing food, or your

toddler pulls all the pots and pans out of the cupboard? Either you constantly lose your temper, or, you learn to let go.

Other parents become obsessed with keeping their kids safe—baby gates for stairs, covers for electric sockets, padding on sharp corners; this is just the beginning. But unless your child walks around in a helmet and full-body-sumo-suit, they are going to get hurt some time—parents need to learn to let go.

As the parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were ushered rather quickly into growing up and letting go. In fact, there much to let go of long before they ever got to labour and delivery. Like all pregnant women, Mary's body was no longer hers alone, but Mary's pregnancy came at the expense of her own reputation. Pregnant before marriage? It may not be scandalous today, but it was then; we can be certain that in a small town, news would travel quickly.

How did she explain things to her parents? How did she explain to Joseph? Matthew 1:19 tells us that when Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, he planned to call the wedding off, but before he could, Gabriel appeared to him in a dream and confirmed Mary's story. But you have to wonder how many people actually believed their pregnancy story, after all, there was a much more likely, and less supernatural, explanation for Mary's new condition.

I wonder, did Mary have to let go of the wedding she'd always dreamed of? Luke 1:39 says that after her conversation with Gabriel—and no doubt, subsequent to conversations with her parents and Joseph—she "*hurried*" to Elizabeth's place in the hill country and stayed there for three months. It's more than possible that Mary and

Joseph had a shotgun wedding, and she got out of town as quickly as she could.²

As some have suggested, Mary can rightly be described as the first “Christian.” Mary was the first person to surrender her life to Jesus—she surrendered to God’s purposes by offering her womb, her reputation, and the plans she had for her life. Joseph can be described in similar fashion. He protected Mary’s reputation and he lovingly raised a son that wasn’t his own—he let go of his plans for marriage and family in order to embrace God’s plans.

The question we should all be asking is *why*? It’s clear from the text that Mary and Joseph were willing participants but the question is, *why were they so willing for their own plans to be interrupted*? The answer we are confronted with is quite simple—they were prepared to let go, because, and only because, they had a profound trust in God’s purpose and plan. And unless we are equally convinced of God’s trustworthiness, we will be found unwilling to let go and participate in God’s purposes for us.

God, I trust that You see more than I see. I trust that You know more than I know. I trust that You are with me, for me, and that Your plans and purposes for me are good. God, I trust that my life is a part of the grand story You are writing in history.

Isn’t this what we see in the text? In vs. 28, Gabriel addresses Mary with the words, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you...Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God.” Mary believed these words—she took them to heart—they enabled

her to let go and participate in God’s rescue operation; a baby would be born, her baby would bring salvation to the world.

In vs. 38 Mary responds to God’s plan saying, “*I am the Lord’s servant,*” but vs. 38 is not possible without vs. 28. It was Mary’s trust in the goodness of God’s purposes that led her to the place of letting go.

Ultimately, we cannot live for ourselves and live for Christ; growing up in Christ means letting go to Christ. And so, in one sense, following Jesus is all loss—we surrender decision-making and control to the One we follow. But in another sense, following Jesus is all gain. We surrender decision-making to One who is infinitely more able to make good decisions for our sake. We also find that when we surrender our attempts at control, fear and anger lose their power over us. **Growing up requires a letting go, and this letting go requires a trust in God.**

Are you prepared to exchange the life you want, for the life God wants for you? Let’s move on to consider our second text, Luke 2:21-35.

21 *On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. 22* *When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord...*

² Matthew 1:24 rounds out the picture; immediately following his conversation with Gabriel, Joseph awoke and took Mary to be his wife.

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." 33 The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Fortunately, when it comes to parenting, the letting go begins with baby steps. First, we let our baby hold their own bottle, later we surrender the baby spoon and our child begins to feed herself. When Luke was learning to ride his bike, the day came when the training wheels had to come off. But let me tell you, it was much easier to take off the training wheels than it was to let go of his seat and watch him pedal away. Parents grow slowly—we let our kids go off to kindergarten and we drop them off for sleepovers, long before we send them to High School, University, a career, or marriage.

Most of the stories surrounding Mary and Joseph take place in the pre-labour stage, but I could easily argue that it was post-pregnancy

that Mary and Joseph really had to trust and surrender. I mean, how exactly does one parent the Saviour of the world?

Our kids have choices to make, some of which are big and important, but parents make lots of decisions too, and our great fear is that we might make such a mess of things that our kids might not recover. Don't you think that Mary and Joseph felt the pressure of raising the Son of God?

In vs. 22-24, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple to present Him before God as the Law instructed. This act of dedication bears some similarity to our own practice of child dedication today. Child dedication reminds parents that the Lord is the Giver of all good gifts—we are not owners of anything, we are merely care-takers of all that God gives, including our kids.

illus: I want to offer you two images this morning—one is of a clenched fist, and the other is of an open hand; these two images represent two different ways of living. I clench, I cling to what I believe is “mine,” but I tend to let go of what belongs to another. In dedicating Jesus, Mary and Joseph's signalled God, themselves, and the community, that they were committed to letting go of Jesus, entrusting Him to God.

We are told that Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit—he went to the Temple and God directed him to Jesus, the long awaited Messiah. Simeon scooped up Jesus in his arms—vs. 28-32—looked at Him and said, “*Sovereign Lord...my eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*” No doubt Mary and Joseph swelled with pride and wonder at

these words, the text says they marvelled at what was said about Jesus—if only Simeon had stopped there.

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

Like all parents, Mary and Joseph had dreams for their son. They pictured Jesus as a King, but not One who wore a crown of thorns. A servant of God, yes, but not a Suffering Servant. A Saviour, yes, but not a Crucified Lord. We’re told that Mary was present at Jesus’ crucifixion; was it then that she finally understood the meaning of Simeon’s words: “*And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*”

Simeon’s stark words remind us that trust and surrender do not guarantee a pain-free life. God’s plans and purposes do not bypass difficulty, pain, or death. In order to deal with sin and death, Jesus needed to bear our sin, and give Himself over to death—a painful, shameful death on a cross.

Gabriel had promised that Jesus would be the King of an eternal kingdom. But on the day Jesus died, Mary was standing at the foot of the cross, watching His life slowly drain away—we’re told that when Jesus died, darkness covered the land. On the day Jesus died, she couldn’t have known that three days later, Jesus would be raised in victory from death. Trust and surrender are always most difficult in the dark, but never doubt in the darkness what God has spoken in the light.

God sees more than we see. God knows more than we know. He is

with us, for us, and our lives are a part of the grand story He is writing in history. We can trust Him, even in the dark.

In the time remaining, I want to now turn our attention to the third text—Luke 2:41-52.

“41 Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

49 “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them. 51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”

I don’t know about you, but I rarely picture Jesus as a Preteen. I am doing so more often these days because I have a preteen son in my

own home. The text I've just read recounts an incident that took place when Jesus was 12—that happens to be the age of my own son.

Next year, Luke is off to Windsor High School and I find myself wondering where the time went. I can remember standing over his crib, watching him sleep. During Luke's first Summer, it was so hot we had to put him to sleep with a fan going in his room. And when I thought Naomi wasn't watching, I would sneak up to his room and put my face up to the back of the fan and do my best Darth Vader impression: "Luke...I am your father."

As I look back on those days, I remember how precious they were. It's because I remember the little boy so well, that I have a hard time letting him go, so that he can grow into a young man. I'm a more experienced parent now than I was then—I've learned just how little of life I can control. I can't make the world a kind place, a safe place, a pain-free place for my kids.

I have to admit, the dialogue between Mary and Jesus sounds a lot like the dialogues Naomi and I are having with Luke. He is growing up and in order to grow up he needs us to let go a little more. Listen to my unofficial translation of the dialogue between Jesus and Mary.

Jesus: *"Mom, why are you so stressed out? It's not that big a deal, I was just hanging out at the Temple for a few days. If I'm going to be like my Father, I need to spend time with people who know Him."*

Mary: *"Stressed out?! Of course I'm stressed out, I'm your mother, it's my job to be stressed out—you had us worried sick. How would you react if your 12 year old went missing for three days?!"*

At 12 years old, Jesus was growing up—His understanding of who He was and how He fit into God's purposes was growing. Jesus was letting go of the safety and security His parents, so that He could venture out into God's world and embrace His calling.

In this sense, Jesus is just like our sons and daughters. Mary and Joseph need to let Him go, entrusting Him to God. It's important to remember that Jesus was venturing out into God's world, and that God was with Him—the same is true as our kids venture out. When we hover too close to our kids, we delay important growth.

Luke tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. We don't often think of Jesus growing, but in His humanity, He did grow—physically, mentally, emotionally, and relationally. All growth requires time; this was true of Jesus and it's also true of us. A grade 3 teacher doesn't expect student to grasp complex algebra—that comes later, with time and development. A U-13 soccer coach doesn't expect a 12 year old boy to have the strength of a 25 year old man.

Growth takes time and requires patience, and the Lord is patient with us—He knows when, where, and how we will grow. These days there is a line from a Rend Collective song stuck in my head: *"You're not finished with me yet, You're not finished with me yet, by Your power I can change, I can change, You're not finished with me yet."*

Growing up in God requires a letting go, and this letting go requires a trust in God. *Where do you sense God asking you to let go? Where is He calling you to deeper places of trust?*

Like Mary and Joseph, may He find us willing wherever He calls.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction