

Advent's Unusual Suspects: Mary, Nazareth and Gabriel

Luke 1:26-38

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~Jesus' Advent message of meaning for young maidens~

[Pray]

The Christmas story in the Bible is like no other. Now we saw last week that the reason for this isn't because there are no other stories that contain the same elements – virgin births, gods walking among people, a star in the east. In fact there are lots of stories in mythology that contain these elements, but unlike every other story, the Christian Christmas story is the only one that is established in actual history.

And Luke, who writes the account we are looking at makes this clear by linking it to actual historical people and places. This means we can go and look up his details to find out when and where these events took place.

The second thing that makes this story unique is that the characters involved are exactly who we wouldn't expect them to be. They aren't superheroes. They aren't strong and prosperous leaders. They aren't beautiful and clever influencers of society – instead they are unusually common.

So last week we looked at old doubting Zechariah and his emotionally wounded and barren wife. These are people you might bump into at Superstore or rent your basement suite to. They are not the kind of people who would make the cover of Celebrity Magazine. And if you try to figure out why God chose them to be part of the biggest event in history the best explanation is that there was absolutely nothing special about them – these are Advent's Unusual Suspects.

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Today we are going to continue our story in the Gospel of Luke so please open your Bibles up to Luke chapter 1 starting in verse 26.¹

[Read Luke 1:26-28]

Now our story today picks up six months after Zechariah and Elizabeth had conceived John the Baptist. And senior-citizen Elizabeth has just come out of five months of hiding because of the shame associated with not having been able to have children. Today perhaps she would stay in hiding under these same circumstances, but people in the first century thought Elizabeth's barrenness – not her pregnancy – was evidence that she had been cursed by God. And now that talk would stop as everyone could see she was pregnant.

And then Gabriel comes to Mary, Elizabeth's cousin, with an incredible message.

¹ Outline and some content adapted from Pastor Mark Clark (Accessed Dec 2, 2015)
<http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/an-unlikely-tale-mary-gabriel/>

Now Gabriel is the only character in the Advent story that is not unusual. It makes sense that God would use an angel to let people know He was planning on renting a womb in the neighbourhood.

But angels aren't the only messengers at God's disposal. Throughout the Bible God speaks through other people; sometimes He uses signs in the sky; and other times He speaks through donkeys. So God doesn't worry how much the postage is going to cost when He wants to get a message out – He has options. But angels are by far His most impressive messengers. And Gabriel is at the top of this pile.

It turns out we only know the names of two angels in the Bible. Michael is the commander of Heaven's army, and Gabriel is the chief messenger. So these are God's "go to" guys when "impressive" is required. So it makes sense that Gabriel gets this important job.

But this is the only part of this story that makes sense. From here it returns to the unusually common. God sends His number one messenger...to Vanderhoof.

Okay, it was Nazareth, but it was a total Hicksville. Nazareth was not a place where anyone important went. And it wasn't a place where anyone of importance came from. You may know that Justin Trudeau was born in Ottawa – that makes sense. Steven Harper was born in Toronto – that makes sense too.

But Nazareth isn't even mentioned in the Old Testament because it is such a hole in the wall. Actually Nazareth makes Vanderhoof seem like Vancouver. Estimates are that there were no more than 400 people living there in the first century so calling it a "town" is pretty generous.² Nazareth was the place you watered your donkey on your way to explore the wilderness. It wasn't even really on the way to anywhere.

So this is not the place that God should grow up. God shouldn't have a plan for a place like Nazareth. Jesus should come from Jerusalem or Rome or Athens. But that's not how God works. God specializes in using no names to accomplish His plans. And this unexpected twist runs rampant throughout the Christmas story. It is always the unusual and inconsequential that make the headlines – and it happens so often that we realize this is the point.

You see God didn't slip up and choose the wrong place or the wrong people. No, God intentionally chooses to work through the insignificant and broken lives of history because when He does it proves that He is great.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazareth#Early_Christian_era (Accessed December 2, 2015)

And God is still in the same business. He is still working in obscure and insignificant places and with unusual suspects. I mean He is willing to show up in Prince George and choose people like me... and even you!

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So this proves with God it doesn't matter what you've done or haven't done in your life, or whether your parents are happy with what you amounted to. It doesn't matter whether there are crazy people in your family. It doesn't matter where you grew up. It doesn't matter whether you can't balance a cheque book or haven't finished high-school or always have bad coffee breathe in the morning. In fact if you want to make it big in God's books your chances are better the worse off you are.

And that's because God isn't looking for impressive and important and smart people to push His plans forward. He doesn't need us. He is looking for people who need a Saviour. And so if you are someone who needs a Saviour today Jesus is looking for you.

And this is the message of Christmas – it's not about you, it's about Him. You aren't anything special or unique or worthy of God showing up. He hasn't chosen you because you are awesome – you aren't. God doesn't love you for you; He loves you for Him because you bear His image.

And in fact this is good. If He loved you for you then when you let Him down He might stop, but because His love is based on Himself it is unconditional. And that's good news for unusual suspects like us. Amen?

Paul writes:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Corinthians 1:26-27)

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And it is in this vein that Gabriel travels to Nazareth to find some young woman pledged to be married to a poor Jewish carpenter.

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Let's keep going. Look at verse 29

[Read Luke 1:29-33]

This is the gospel of Christmas. The Son of the Most High came to establish an unending kingdom on earth. And He used a young woman to open the door.

Now I want to talk specifically to young single women in their teens or twenties today because here there is another unusual aspect of this story that those in our

culture tend to gloss over. But no one in the first century would miss this. And so if you aren't a young woman you can either nod off or listen in.

So first century Greco-Roman culture was extremely patriarchal. That means only men had value and women, children and slaves were possessions. And yet God chooses a girl to bring the most important life into human history.

Now given, men aren't that good at having babies, but that isn't really the point. God didn't have to come as a baby. He could have descended in a shaft of light out of nowhere. And actually this is how some people expected the Messiah to arrive. John tells us many were offended at Jesus' common origin and said:

But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." (John 7:27)

But instead of dropping out of the sky with hammer in hand like Thor, Jesus chose the weakest most unusual way for a God to show up – as a baby born to a totally inconsequential member of society, an unwed girl. Now there is lots of meaning in this, but one thing this establishes is that your value, especially as a young woman, doesn't have to come from what society says about you. Your value doesn't have to come from what your classmates or friends think of you. Instead your value can come from your willingness to participate in what God is doing. To not participate in what God is doing to increase His glory and expand His kingdom is to be a waste of breath. And so Mary is valuable because she lets God use her. In verse 38 she says "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Now none of you are going to be God's mom, but God has chosen you to bring His presence to your friends and family – He's given you a mission. And by choosing you Jesus is being consistent with what He did throughout His earthly ministry. Jesus was constantly elevating and endowing women with meaning.

So for example Jesus taught women which doesn't seem like much to us, but the rabbinic culture of the day said "he who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself."³ And He chose women who to be the first witnesses of the resurrection even though their testimony wasn't admissible in court. And He did lots more.

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But how is this relevant to us? Well, while women are allowed to vote today the reality is our culture still places expectations on them that they don't put on men. If you are a young woman you are told that your value comes from how you look and what you do with those looks. And there is a lot of pressure on young women to do what your male counterpart wants. If you don't you're a prude, and if you do you are even worse. Young women are still undervalued in our culture.

³ <https://bible.org/article/christianity-best-thing-ever-happened-women> (Accessed Dec 5, 2015)

And so if you are a teen or 20- something woman this text calls you not to look to our culture to get your identity or meaning. Our culture says you matter if you look right and do right. But choose not to listen to that. Don't look to the next celebrity singer or actor to tell you what you have to do – I'm not even going to try to name an example because I will just prove I'm old – instead, like Mary, look to participate with what God is doing, and let His favor be your source of identity.

Now the word “favor” is significant here. Some have thought Mary earned her spot by being particularly innocent, but that isn't what “favor” means. It means “to make graceful” or to “pursue with grace”. So to be favored by God means to receive something from Him that you don't deserve – that's what grace is!

So the text recognizes that Mary wasn't perfect – she needed grace just like you. And this makes her a super normal, nothing special girl from a small town. And that's the point. God didn't choose her because she was great or especially holy. She wasn't chosen to be the heroine of this story. Jesus is the hero.

And this is the same way it is for all of us as well. We aren't valuable to God because of what we wear or how we look or even how smart we are. We are valuable to Him because He has chosen us to show His greatness through us. We aren't the hero, He is!

Now many Christians have made mistakes here. We've gone to the Bible looking for people to emulate – looking for heroes. So we see David and then try to follow his example and defeat the giants of our lives. But the point of the story isn't that we can become giant slaying heroes, it is that we need a hero. The fact is we are in David's story, but we aren't David! We are supposed to associate ourselves with the Israelite soldiers who are cowering in fear unable to confront Goliath. And David is Jesus who comes to our rescue and leads us to victory without us doing anything at all.

That's how we need to read the Bible because the Bible is full of regular people not heroes. There is only one hero in the Bible and that is God. And that is why the Bible makes such a big effort to point out how broken and sinful the people of the Bible are. David is a murderer. Abraham was an adulterer. Noah was a drunk. The point is none of these people are great – only God is great.

Now I came across a excerpt written by theologian Sinclair Ferguson that does a great job giving several examples of how to read the Bible in this light. He writes:

Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us. [That means when you read of Adam connect it with Jesus, who didn't eat the apple and so can give us His righteousness.]

Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal.

Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing wither he went to create a new people of God.

Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us.”...

Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant...

Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends.

Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn’t just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people....

Jesus is the... real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He’s the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread.

The Bible’s really not about you – it’s about Him.⁴

Brilliant! That means when we come to Mary we can be sure that she isn’t the hero of her story either, and you and I aren’t the hero of ours. We are all just as unusual and unlikely as everyone else and Jesus is the hero. Amen?

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If you believe this then the call is for you to live in a way that proves it. Use your life to point to the hero who makes you count – live for Jesus.

And from her position of unlikelihood this is what Mary does. Look at verse 34.

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament” taken from <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2007/05/23/keller-gospel-centered-ministry/> (Accessed December 4, 2015)

[Read Luke 1:34-38]

Now right off the bat you might think that Mary's response in verse 34 is similar to Zechariah's back in verse 18. But while the words are comparable the heart behind them is different. Mary asks how she can have a baby because she understands human sexuality; Zechariah's question was based on his doubt of God's ability to intervene.

And so while the old priest got his mouth sealed for 9 months, Gabriel gives Mary an explanation. God will be the source of your pregnancy. Even though you are a virgin, you will have a baby.

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But what's the big deal about Mary being a virgin?

Now some people have pointed out that there is ambiguity with the word "virgin" in this text and in prophecy in Isaiah. Isaiah says:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
(Isaiah 7:14)

That's the prophecy, but these people have pointed out that in both these cases the word "virgin" actually means "young maiden". And they are right. But what they are wrong about is that they are assuming that an unmarried 13 or 14 year old girl in first century Israel would be sexually active.

Now our culture is so hyper sexualized that it isn't uncommon for unmarried teenagers to be sexually active, but Mary and Joseph didn't live in 21st century Prince George. They were living in an incredibly conservative Jewish culture where, when people were betrothed, it was nothing like dating today.

So Joseph never picked Mary up on his donkey and took her back to his place to watch romantic movies in the basement. That's our culture, and it's no wonder that it seems impossible to remain sexually pure outside of marriage. But that wasn't anything like the first century betrothal system. To be betrothed in Israel meant that you were literally surrounded by chaperones all the time. So if Mary and Joseph were watching movies they were watching *The Grinch* and Mary's mom was sitting on the couch with them.

Now our culture says it is unreasonable to expect that kind of behavior from young people – or even older people for that matter. But that's a lie. It is possible to honour God with our bodies. But to be successful requires a choice up front. People aren't designed to choose not to have sex after cuddling on the couch in the dark. If you are going to live a sexually pure life you need to stop trying not to step over the sin fence. If you are trying to get as close to the fence without falling over you are going to fall eventually. Instead you need to run towards God and holiness. It is only when you are running away from the fence

and into Jesus' arms that you will experience deliverance from sin. And this is true whether you are 14 or 70 and male or female.

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Now as far as whether Mary was a virgin or not the text in Matthew makes it clear. He writes:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

Matthew avoids the word "virgin" and just makes it clear that her and Joseph hadn't come together yet. So Mary was a virgin.

But why is it important that Mary was a virgin?

People have come up with lots of theories. So some have said Mary was a virgin because God is down on sex. But that's not true. He is just down on people hurting themselves with sex the same way He is down on people hurting themselves with food or leisure or anything else. God isn't down on fun or pleasure. In fact God wants us to enjoy these things. It is just that He knows how they work and so He tells us to use them as they were designed. And He says that sex is designed for marriage – so the question is will you trust Him? If you've got questions about where in the Bible it says that come talk with me.

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Other people have said Mary had to be a virgin so that Jesus wouldn't be born with a sinful nature. But at the foundation of this idea is that sin somehow gets passed on through men.

So before people understood about how reproduction works, the common belief was that women were the incubator for the baby that men would put there. But we know now this isn't the way things work, and this idea isn't in the Bible. And frankly I'm a bit troubled by the idea that people would try to blame all of sin on men. Now certainly no connection between masculinity and sainthood, but there is no connection between femininity and sainthood either. Women are just as capable of sin as men are. So that's not why Mary had to be a virgin.

Other people have said God had to be Jesus' father in order for Jesus to be both God and man. But then we have to wonder did Jesus have Mary's eyes or nose? Did He look like His mom at all? Was Jesus was 50% God and 50% Mary? The answer to that is "no" if you are wondering. Jesus was 100% God and 100% human.⁵ So this means that where his human genetics came from is

⁵ Jesus is fully God – John 1:8; 20:28; Titus 2:13. Jesus was fully man – 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7. Jesus was sinless – Hebrews 4:15. Also see the early church **Chalcedonian Creed** "our Lord Jesus Christ... the self-same perfect in Godhead, the self-same perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man..."

totally irrelevant. Jesus could have been born naturally – He could have had a human mom and dad – God could have made it work right?

So none of these proposed reasons are why Jesus was born of a virgin? So why then? I think there are some good reasons, I'll give you three:

First, like we looked at last week, the miraculous in this story make it capture our imaginations – God designed us to love stories of the miraculous. And He knew we would tell our own stories, and so He ordained that the other myths would point to His own story without their even knowing it. God has His fingerprints in the history of human mythology.

Second, Jesus' virgin birth shows that Jesus is unique. So He is more than just a man. In the Gospel of John Jesus is continually saying things like:

I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me. (John 6:38)

So Jesus believed He was unique. No other sane person has ever claimed to come from heaven. And His virgin birth fits with this idea.

But third and I think this is the big reason that Jesus was born of a virgin. In doing it this way God says "I'm the one who made this happen. You couldn't save yourselves, I had to do it. I had to leave heaven and come to earth to take your place. And that makes Me the hero. God made it possible for sinful humanity to re-connect with Himself. And this is what Christmas is all about.

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So Christmas is coming. And at this time we celebrate that God stepped into our world to fix the problem we have stuck ourselves in. None of us have lived lives that make us anything other than unusually common. We are all sinners. And sinners need a hero if they are going to be saved.

And that is what Jesus came to be. And to accomplish this God used the most unlikely people – the most unusual suspects – He could find in order to make it obvious that He is the Hero. And He wants to be your hero. He wants to be your Savior. He wants to be your God. And He wants us to live our lives in response to His heroism.

So what are you going to do with this historical reality? What are you going to do about what He did? He came. He died. He rose again. What is your life going to say about the heroism of Jesus?