

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 6 & 7, 2014
John & Laura Crosby
Come and See: Unexpected Jesus
Luke 1:46-56

JC: Once or twice a year I ask Laura if she would preach with me. I don't do it more often than that because I don't want to lose my job, but we have found that it's helpful, especially at this time of year, to look at the Scriptures together and see how it might strike us differently, male and female, and enrich our lives as a community together. So, today we'll look at the story of Mary.

LC: Will you pray with me.

Lord, this story of Mary is so, so familiar that sometimes we don't really hear it anymore, but you've said that Your Word is living and active so help us to lean in with extra patience and truly be present to you, Lord. Help us to hear Your voice, Your words to us this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It was July 30, 1989 over 25 years ago. We were living in Washington, D.C. It was right before we moved here and it was our wedding anniversary. Because it was our wedding anniversary and we love Mexican food, John decided to take me to this tiny, little, hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant near our house that we had been hearing about. When we got there, this little place was already very crowded and we had to wait to be seated. As we waited, we noticed a couple of guys in suits with earpieces, Secret Service types.

That wasn't terribly unusual. We were living in Washington, D.C. where there was need for secret service in different situations, ambassadors who needed protection or different cabinet members or whatever. While we waited, we speculated that maybe somebody important might be coming to eat at this restaurant. Eventually we got seated and looked at our menus and ordered.

We were seated right by the front window of this little place looking out on the street. As we were waiting for our meal, there got to be more and more activity. A couple more Secret Service guys came inside and out in the street we noticed more cars. Eventually, there was a whole bunch of police on motorcycles and then an ambulance and then police cars and then these black SUVs. It was a motorcade. John's sightline out the window was better than mine and I kept saying, "Who is it? Who is it?" He was peering out and finally said, "Oh, my gosh" and a minute later, in the door of this tiny, hole-in-the wall Mexican restaurant walked the President of the United States. [Slide shown of President George H. W. Bush.] President Bush had decided spur of the moment that he wanted Mexican food.

JC: I arranged the whole thing.

LC: No! President Bush pretended to tip his hat and bow to the 50 or so of us in the restaurant who were clapping. They seated him at the back where he was against the wall. John would like you to believe that he arranged all of this for our anniversary. Not so much! We are very ordinary people. We do not hang out with Presidents. We didn't do anything to deserve this or expect this. We were unlikely people in an unlikely place with an unlikely visitor, kind of like Mary in the Gospel of Luke.

Two weeks ago we had Story Weekend here at CPC and it was so great because we heard about the work of God in the stories of different people's lives. Today we thought we would look at Mary's story and at what we might be able to learn from her about living a better with-God life. In the Bible we see the large story of God. We see creation, fall, redemption, and we look forward to restoration. That is this large story but within that, we can find our smaller stories that are part of God's large story.

In His story, God chooses highly unlikely people, like Mary, in unlikely places, like Nazareth, and He uses very unlikely strategies, think manger, angels, shepherds, star, wise men, to achieve a very unlikely outcome, the salvation of the world. We are going to look at Luke 1 and I am going to start reading in verse 26. It says this.

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.

We want to stop there for just a minute because it says that Mary was a virgin pledged to be married. In other Scripture accounts, it says *betrothed*. You should remember that there were three stages of marriage back then. First of all, the family would agree on the union. Second was the betrothal, the situation that Mary was in. There was a public announcement that was binding and could only be broken by death or divorce. They used the term *husband and wife* when the couple was betrothed because it was such a binding legal commitment. So, moving on,

The virgin's name was Mary. **28** The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! 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 favor 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

We'll stop again for a minute. It says Mary was highly favored. Highly favored? Mary could be divorced by Joseph and stoned by the Jewish authorities because her pregnancy could have been considered adultery. Also, unless Joseph agreed to go through with the marriage with her being pregnant, she would likely remain unmarried all of her life. If her father rejected her, she could be forced into begging or prostitution.

JC: So, no wonder Mary had questions.

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 it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

Mary was an unlikely person in a highly unlikely place, and God used her in an unlikely way to make a way for us to be reconciled through the baby that Mary carried.

LC: So just briefly, what we know about Mary. First of all, she was young. Girls could be engaged at age 12 and married at age 13 in this culture. Second, she was poor. She was from Nazareth—a remote town that was despised because it was on the trade route and Gentiles would go through there and they were despised. Roman soldiers were stationed there also. Mary was young, she was poor, and she was a girl who had no credibility. She was of little value in this culture. Next, if she said she was pregnant, she would probably be considered crazy, so she risked that. She is ordinary. She is human, just like us, with doubts and fears and weaknesses and sin and all the rest of the stuff. She was like us, but here she is, chosen by God.

Have any of you ever watched the TV show, The Voice? Even if you haven't watched it, you're probably familiar with it. There are four celebrity coaches, and they are the judges who sit in the red chairs: Pharrell Williams, Adam Levine, Gwen Stefani, and Blake Shelton. At the beginning of the show, they sit with their backs to the contestants, who one at a time stand up and sing. If the judges in the red chairs decide the person is good enough to coach, they will hit the button and their chair turns around. They choose based on the contestant's voice, not their appearance.

Now imagine you are a contestant on that stage in front of millions and millions of people. You are nervous. You are unsure. You are performing and hoping that one of the judges will think you are good enough to hit the button, turn around and choose you. Now, maybe not on that scale, but have you ever felt a little bit like that? Like your whole life is kind of a tryout, an audition, and you are trying to be good enough, special enough, smart enough or pretty enough to be chosen?

Mary is not the only one we see God choosing for His story. In Jeremiah 1, it says,

4 The word of the LORD came to me, saying, **5** "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart

God told Jeremiah, "I chose you before you were ever part of the story at all." And then in 1st Peter 2:9, it says,

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The thing is, God has chosen each of us for a part in His story. He has turned His chair around and said He wants us on His team, as unlikely as we are, and He has committed to coaching us, too. God chose you and Jeremiah and Mary and Moses and Esther. As inadequate as you might feel, God chose you and turned His chair around even before you sang your first note. A lot of people think, "If I could just lose 10 pounds" or "If I could earn \$20,000 more" or "If I could make this mark," God would hit the button and turn His chair around. God has already chosen us, but the enemy wants to distract us by convincing us that we need to achieve something in order to be cast in the part. Steven Furtick says, "Cancel the Auditions! If we had to audition, we would fail. We have already gotten the part." If auditions were based on our talent, we wouldn't even be in the room with a holy God. God loves you and chooses you, as is. I don't need to audition, and neither do you and neither did Mary.

JC: If you don't hear anything else this whole Christmas season, hear that! Let that sink in. God chose you. You've already gotten the part. You don't have to audition. We've been chosen by a God who loves us. That's what Paul says to the Corinthians.

26 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.
27 But God chose . . . the weak things . . . [1st Corinthians 1:26-27]

You and I. God's already turned around and said, "I want you and I'll coach you. You've been chosen to play a part." That's Mary's first teaching. You don't have to audition. You've already gotten the part you are chosen to play. The challenge comes that when we get this, we feel like we are blessed. That's the story, right? The angel comes and says, "Mary, you are blessed among women and you've been chosen to play this part, but you might not like the particular part that God's story has you living right now." Mary also shows us that every story has conflict in it, and pain and distraction.

Everybody always wants to be blessed all the time. That's me! Mary is called *the blessed one*, but that doesn't mean the comfortable one, because one thing that I know that Christians love is being blessed. Laura showed me this blog by Jamie Wright. She said, "Our blessings usually come in the form of material goods or cold, hard cash. But if you do a quick search of *blessed*, you will find we also enjoy blessings of health, abundance of any form, good weather, good grades, good food, work promotions, winning games, sleeping babies, coffee, wine, narrowly averted disasters, and, better yet, other people's disasters" because they remind us that our lives aren't nearly as bad as that fool over there. We're blessed!

Sometimes a word doesn't mean what you think it means. That's a concept from one of the great theological movies of our day. Have any of you seen *The Princess Bride*? There's this great thing in *The Princess Bride* where the bad guy is running away from the good guy and he keeps looking back, and through the dark, through the mountains, through everything, the good guy keeps chasing him. He gets closer and he goes, "Impossible! Inconceivable that he can do this. Impossible." Finally one of his henchmen turns to him and says, "You keep using this word, but I don't think it means what you think it means."

I think blessed does not mean exactly what we think it means. We've created a culture where we measure God's blessing in terms of dollars and cents, comfort and pleasure, wealth, wellbeing. So if we're happy and healthy and we have everything we need, then we're blessed and we should thank God and we could probably put it on social media. But that means we

need to ignore the message that this sends to others who might be unhappy or unhealthy or for whom things are just generally lousy right now. “Too bad, so sorry. If your life stinks, you’re not blessed.”

Being blessed does not mean being pleased. It does not mean happy. It does not mean fulfilled. It doesn’t even mean fed or clothed or housed or healthy. Mary learns that what blessed really means is that you are not alone—God’s blessing is His presence. The blessing of God is that God is always with us. God’s blessing is not fun stuff. Contrary to American belief, the blessing of God is not what He gives us. Mary is blessed because she becomes convinced that the God of the universe is with her.

LC: So from Mary’s story, we can see that we don’t need to audition and that there will be conflict, but God is with us and God is good. The third thing we can see is that God is the main character of the story. Not Mary, not us. I’m going to read the words that Mary spoke as she responded to the angel. As I do, listen. Note the words that Mary uses to describe God and the words she uses to refer to herself.

46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, **49** for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. **50** His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. **51** He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. **52** He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. **53** He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. **54** He has helped his servant Israel

In spite of the outwardly bad circumstances, Mary refers to herself as humble and blessed, and then she focuses on the attributes of God, whom she knows and trusts. Now, I know I talked about this before, but I think there are two approaches we can take to life. One is top down and one is bottom up. With bottom-up living, I start with me and my circumstances, and I project onto God. So if things are going well, then I’m blessed and God is good, but if things are going badly with me, then God must be bad. That is a bottom-up approach. Top-down living starts with the belief that the Bible is true and God is good. He is who He says He is. He is sovereign and He loves me. I interpret my circumstances in light of God’s character. That’s a top-down approach. An example of this is Mary’s response when the angel tells her she is pregnant. She says, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Not “Are you kidding me right now, God? I am an unwed teenager. I am pregnant and I might be stoned if my fiancé doesn’t stand up for me. Oh, and by the way, I’m a girl and I’m poor and You must be a terrible God.” No, Mary has a top-down approach to life and she trusts that God is good and that He is with her.

JC: Doesn’t she sound like a teenager? Because that’s what Mary is. Mary is a teenager who is hard-wired to complain, but Mary has developed an unshakable faith in the character of God. Her faith is child-like, like these little kids we saw up on the stage this morning. Child-like, but not childish. She’s not afraid of her circumstances because God is with her.

Mary could not have had that kind of unshakable faith that would be there no matter what the circumstances were unless it had started before the circumstances changed. There had to have been a million different little things that went into her observing that God was around her all the time. Mary had cultivated a spirit that was struck by the presence of God. She was

wonderstruck. I have that same Mary-choice every day. I can choose to keep my head down or I can choose to be wonderstruck and encounter God daily in ways that wake me up to His love and His presence and a larger story, no matter what chapter I'm in, so I can lean in and be truly present. Maybe that could be your Christmas prayer. "Wake me up. Show me this larger story. Fill me with wonder." It's different for each one of us.

For me, frankly, its late night walks. I go out on the beach. If my head goes up, I see the stars. I get right-sized. I'm not unimportant, but I am not God. Laura does the same thing at 5 o'clock in the morning when Jesus is still asleep and somehow, it works for her as well. For you, it might be beautiful music, the echo of God's voice. For you it might be the sight or touch of a baby, the gift of life. What is it that makes you realize that God is all around us, the main character in your story?

LC: So in this season of noise and busyness, we want to give you the gift of silence. We want to invite you into a time of silence to reflect on the main character of your story. As there is silence, there will be text on the screen that will bring forward some of the names and descriptions of God that Mary spoke in response to the angel. Will you join me in entering into this time and reflect on which of these you need most to be reminded of in this season? [Pause.]

JC: Let's pray.

Lord God, one of the things that strikes me is how rarely I am quiet, even just for 90 seconds, so that You can speak to me in the silence. I thank You for Your teaching here, that I don't have to audition for Your love, that You have turned to me and want to bless me. I thank You that I'm not as confused today about blessing. That blessing is not just the good times, but the presence of the good God who won't leave. As I look at Your different names and attributes, I thank You that it's not all about me. Lord, it's a great thing to start Christmas with Communion, to be brought to Your table to offer You my heart again and to have You love me. I pray that as I take the bread, it would remind me of the real texture of You becoming flesh. I pray that as I drink the juice, it would remind me of the cost of Your love in blood and that as we gather together, we would hear the angels singing all around us that we are all beloved and blessed. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.