

December 22/23, 2001

Advent, 2001

Bondslave of the Lord

Luke 1:26-38

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I think it was in 1980, during my last year of college in Chicago, when the big news was that the Pope was coming to Chicago. I thought, *Well, that would be interesting to see the Pope in person.* So on the particular day when the Pope was coming into downtown Chicago to go to a large Catholic church, I went down there. There were thousands of people lined up along the street, so I lined up with them and waited for close to a half hour. Pretty soon, here came this motorcade of police cars and limousines. Finally, there was this big white limo and it stopped right in front of the church. Out of the limo came the Secret Service people and then out climbed the Pope. He looked around, and then a most amazing thing happened. I was staring right at him, and he looked and stared right at me. All of a sudden, he started to walk right toward me, while the Secret Service maneuvered around to keep up with him. He walked right up to me and put his hand on my forehead and prayed some prayer in Italian—I don't know what he even said. Then he invited me to go into the church with him.

Actually, that's not quite the way it happened. I was there...in the crowd. The pope got out...and he didn't even wave. He was surrounded by Secret Service, and they took him right into the church. I was nobody...I was just a face in the crowd.

It happened to me again a couple years ago when we were in Washington, D.C. All the way out, I had told my girls that one of the purposes for going was that I needed about 10 minutes with the vice president. I was concerned about his environmental policies, because they were kind of getting in the way of my fishing. So I thought, *10 minutes—that's reasonable.*

We were in the nation's Capitol building, taking our tour. We got off the elevator and there were the Secret Service and police. They stopped us and wouldn't let us go any further. Before we could ask, "Why?" there went the vice president and his entourage, walking right by us. The girls looked at me like, *Dad, this is your chance!* But... the guys in front of us had loaded weapons. The vice president didn't even stop and chat. He didn't ask me my opinion. I was just a face in the crowd—a nobody.

In Broken Bow they have what they call the "One Box Hunt," and they bring celebrities into town to participate in this. Right after the Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf came to participate in the One Box Hunt. I waited all evening...I had cookies...I had coffee. I thought for sure he'd call. I thought he'd stop by and we could chat about the war and how things were going. But he didn't even call.

Even recently, President Bush came to Omaha for the College World Series. Firth isn't that far from Omaha, so I thought maybe he'd swing by and say, "Hi." He didn't. He didn't even call. You see, in this world's culture I am a nobody. I'm a nobody—I'm just a face in the crowd. I don't have access to kings and presidents. I just don't; I never will.

But that's what I like about the Christmas story. The Christmas story reminds us that there is another way. I think that's why the Christmas story is so hope-filled to people who are just ordinary—people who are poor or disadvantaged or suffering. It's because there is something in the story of Christmas, when God came near. He didn't come to the kings. He

didn't come to the rulers. He didn't come to the rich and powerful. He came to the ordinary—to the face in the crowd. There's something about that which reminds us, in this culture in which we live, that maybe there is another way. Maybe there's another kingdom where I can be somebody.

The story of Christmas really goes all the way back to Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and were thrown out of Paradise. There, in Genesis 3, is the slightest hint that God is going to do something to get us back to Paradise. It would come through the seed of a woman. We're told that the enemy would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, but the seed of the woman would crush the head of the enemy—that the victory would be won.

Throughout the Old Testament that concept is developed. We're introduced to images (pictures) that the blood of the Lamb would be shed for the sins of the world. The prophets began to develop this understanding of the coming Messiah. One of the passages we're very familiar with at Christmas time is in Isaiah 9:6,7 where Isaiah says:

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

The Jewish people began to understand the concept of the coming Messiah—this Son that would be born. But, by the time you get to the end of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, God has had it up to here with His people. As a matter of fact, He says that. He says, "I've had it up to here with you and your sacrifices and the way you treat me." So God judged these people; and His judgment was that, for 400 years, He would remain silent. And He did. During those 400 years, the Jewish people suffered the oppression from one nation after another—conquering them, oppressing them, abusing them. And they held onto this hope that there was a Messiah coming who would set them free—who would deliver them from this tyranny.

While under the oppression of the Roman government in the first century, that blessed night the shepherds were out in the field. And the angels appeared to say that grand event was here. But the angels didn't go to the religious establishment. They didn't go to the priests. They didn't go to the kings. They didn't go to the rich and powerful. The angels appeared to the shepherds—the lowliest of the low.

Shepherds were so low that they were forbidden to testify in a court of law. They had nothing to say. But that is whom the angels appeared to. The shepherds went down into Bethlehem to see the Christ-child, and they began to tell Mary and Joseph and the people who were there what they had been told by the angels. Everybody marveled at what they heard. Probably for the first time in their lives they were players. They mattered; they had something to contribute.

Nine months before that, the angel Gabriel had come to a couple in a very obscure village called Nazareth. When we hear "Nazareth" we think of the home of Jesus; it doesn't carry for us the same stigma that it did in the first century. Nazareth was in Galilee—a small village of probably 1500-2000 people. It was a place that had a reputation. It was the wrong

side of the tracks. In fact, when Nathanael, who was a righteous man, heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, he said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) That’s how everybody felt. Nazareth was the ghetto; it was a place of poverty. They were a mongrel people and they were disdained.

But in that small village there was a poor carpenter, probably in his mid-20’s, by the name of Joseph. And Joseph was betrothed to a young virgin girl by the name of Mary. Mary was probably 12, 13, maybe 14 years of age. It was very common that Jewish girls were betrothed when they were 12. So Mary probably was no older than 14.

The Bible often interprets this betrothal as engagement, but it is different than our engagement. If two people decided they would like to marry, the parents got involved. They would meet together and begin to negotiate this marriage, and they would settle on a price. They would, then, begin the betrothal period, which was usually about a year. During that year Mary would have lived at home, and Joseph would have lived at his home. But the only way to break a betrothal was through divorce, so it was much more binding than our engagement. During that time there was to be no physical contact between the couple, and finally they would work their way to the wedding day.

It was in that time period, as Joseph was betrothed to Mary, that the angel Gabriel shows up and says the most unimaginable thing to a very common, very ordinary young girl in Nazareth. That’s recorded in Luke 1. Zacharias and Elizabeth were a godly couple. Elizabeth was barren—she had no children—and she was well past childbearing age when the angel Gabriel appeared to them and said they would have a son in their old age. He said this son would be the forerunner—the announcer of the Messiah—John the Baptist.

Luke 1:26: “Now in the sixth month {referring to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy} the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth.” Again, it’s important to remind you that when we read those words, for a first century reader there was a stigma. There was something attached to those words that this (Nazareth) was not a place anybody lived. This was a place where *nobodies* lived. It’s the most unusual place for the Messiah to come from.

Verse 27: “to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” We’re introduced to the characters. There is Joseph, a carpenter, a descendent of David. But don’t read into that, that he lived as some sort of royalty, because he didn’t. He was just of the line of David; he was a very poor carpenter. And there was Mary, who was a virgin.

Verse 28: “And coming in, he said to her, ‘Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be.” When the angel appeared to Mary, Mary became frightened. Mary was troubled, not just because of the presence of the angel, but because of specifically what the angel had said to her.

So what did the angel say? The angel said, “Hail, favored one!” (v28). That word “favored one” is a form of the Greek word from which we get our word “grace.” It literally means that Mary was about to receive grace—unmerited, undeserved favor from God. The Catholic church has interpreted this as “Hail, Mary, *full* of grace” with the idea that Mary is the dispenser of grace, so Mary is to be prayed to. But there’s nowhere in the New Testament

where that is taught, and that's not what this statement means. It's a passive verb, which means Mary is the *recipient* of grace—undeserved favor.

In 1854 the Pope declared a doctrine called the Immaculate Conception. It was a belief that Mary was immaculately conceived, and because of that, she was sinless. But the New Testament doesn't teach that. Grace, by its very definition, is undeserved favor. As a matter of fact, in verse 47, Mary even says she needs a Savior. It's also important to realize that if Mary had been sinless when God came near, then He didn't come to the ordinary. If that is true, He didn't come to the face in the crowd, but He came to the perfect. And if that's the case, then we're all in trouble.

But that's not the Christmas story. The Christmas story is that when God came near, He came to the ordinary. He came to those who needed grace. He came to those who needed a Savior.

“Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” We're so used to that terminology that it doesn't even surprise us. We talk about the very nature of God dwelling within us—the very presence of God being in us. But this is still under the Old Covenant, so they didn't think that way at all. The presence of God was in the Holy of Holies in the temple. They didn't think in terms of the very presence of God being with someone individually. So this statement, “the very presence of God is with you,” was a radical statement. And Mary was frightened and troubled. She didn't know what to do with this statement.

So the angel said in verse 30: “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor *{that's the same word again, meaning you are a recipient of grace}* with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Now, that is a mouthful.

When Patti was pregnant with our girls, I thought they'd be great—still do. But the angel Gabriel is going way beyond that. He's saying, “This son will be great. His name will be Jesus. The name means ‘The Lord is our salvation.’ He'll be the Messiah. He'll be the king who will sit on the throne of His Father David, only He will reign forever.” Gabriel was clearly identifying Him as the Messiah.

This fourth Sunday of Advent is represented by the four advent candles and the theme, “Jesus is King.” That's exactly what Gabriel said to Mary: “He will be the King of Kings.” She responds with a very legitimate question. Verse 34: “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ ” Literally, in the Greek it means, “I've never known the man. I've never had relations with a man.”

Verse 35: “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ ” Keep in mind, Mary is probably 12, 13, maybe 14. She is told she is going to have a son and the son will be the Messiah—the King of Kings. She says, “How can that be? I've never had relations with a man.” And the angel says the most

amazing thing. He says, “The Spirit of God is going to come upon you and with Him you will conceive. And that child in your womb is going to be God.”

About this time Mary is thinking, *This is impossible*. So the angel goes on to tell Mary, “You know, everybody thought it was impossible for Zacharias and Elizabeth to have children. They’d never had any and Elizabeth was well-past child-bearing years. And now she’s in the sixth month, because with God nothing is impossible.”

Mary was quite a remarkable young woman. We can only imagine what was going through her head. What would it be like for God to dwell in the very womb He had created? What would it be like to have a child who is God? How do you raise God? Do you suppose Mary ever said to Jesus’ brothers and sisters, “Why can’t you be more like Jesus?” You talk about a hard act to follow.

How do you suppose Jesus responded as a boy when He heard His friends take His name in vain? Do you suppose Jesus ever listened with a smile on His face as people wondered at the beauty of a sunset that He had made? Do you suppose Jesus ever stared at the animals as they were playing, knowing He had created them exactly that way? Do you suppose, in that carpenter shop, when Jesus heard that unmistakable sound of a hammer striking a nail, that he winced—knowing one day those nails would be driven through Him? What would it be like to grow up as God?

Mary is a 12 or 13 year-old girl pondering what all this could possibly mean. It must have seemed absolutely overwhelming. Beyond that, there would be certain social issues. It was a small village and people could do the math that this wasn’t Joseph’s son, so he would be labeled an illegitimate child. As a matter of fact, at one time in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees even say, “We were not born of fornication”—meaning that was a label attached to Jesus. He was considered to be illegitimate.

And what about Joseph? Joseph, also, was a remarkable man of faith—a simple, ordinary carpenter with an extraordinary faith. Matthew 1:18-25:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.”

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL, which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US.’ ”

And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Can you imagine that first conversation when Mary sat down with Joseph to explain that she was with child? It must have broke Joseph’s heart. It was the girl that he loved...that

he was betrothed to...that he was going to marry. He must have wondered who it was. Who was the father? And why had she done this?

Joseph had three basic options. He could have gone ahead and married her, but no righteous Jew would have done that, and he didn't choose that option. He could have publicly disgraced her. She had the potential to be stoned for her sin. He didn't choose that; he loved her too much for that. So the text says he chose to just quietly put her away. That's the language for divorce; he's going to quietly divorce her and she would live out her life in obscurity.

But the angel appeared and said, "Joseph, Mary is with child from the very Spirit of God." And Joseph believed that, and he married Mary. But they probably lived with that label the entire time that they lived in Nazareth.

It just seems to me that Mary would have been overwhelmed with all that she was hearing. Yet she responds in an absolutely remarkable fashion. It is true that Mary was ordinary. But it's also true that she had an extraordinary faith. It would be fair to say this was a remarkable young woman. Look at how she responds. Verse 38: "And Mary said, 'Behold, the bonds slave {*the female slave, literally*} of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her." Just like that. Mary had just heard the most remarkable thing—that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. In her womb would be God Himself, and as a 12 or 13 year-old girl, she responded by saying, "God, I'm your bonds slave. Do to me according to your word." That's pretty remarkable.

You see, the great thing about the Christmas story is that it reminds us that God came near. And when He did, he didn't come to the rich and the powerful and the movers and the shakers or to the kings and princes. He came to the ordinary. He came to people like you ... people like me. I will never have access to kings and presidents—I just won't. In the culture of this world, I am a non-player. I'm a nobody—just a face in the crowd. But God has offered me a whole different kingdom where, at any moment through Jesus Christ, I have access directly to the presence of God. I am His child.

I don't know where you're at in your spiritual journey. Maybe you struggle with your own sense of worth. Maybe you look at your past and, in your opinion, it's littered with failure. So you feel like just a face in the crowd—that you are a nobody. You need to read the Christmas story, because the Christmas story reminds you that is *not* true in God's kingdom. When God came near, he came *near*. So people like you, through Jesus Christ, could enter directly into the presence of God.

But there's a little bit more to it than that, even. Maybe this year God will come to you and He will tap on your shoulder and say, "Will you help me change the world?" When He does that, don't backpedal and say, "Oh, no, not me. I'm nothing. I'm a nobody. I'm just a face in the crowd." Maybe at that moment you will remember Mary. You'll remember Mary because, as you go from Genesis to Revelation, you find that God has always delighted in using ordinary people. And you will say, with Mary, "Lord, may it be done, according to your Word." And God will use you to change this world.

Luke 2:1-20:

Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was with child.

And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. And the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

And it came about when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as he lay in the manger. And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.”

Our Father, we are thankful for the wonderful story of Christmas. Lord, how thankful we are that when you came near, became flesh among us, that you didn't come to kings and rulers. You came to shepherds and an obscure couple in an obscure village—ordinary faces in the crowd. And, Lord, you used them to change the world. Lord, give us the faith to trust as Mary and Joseph did, that when you invite us to believe the impossible that we will say with Mary, “May it be done according to your Word.” In Jesus' name, Amen.