

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY

LUKE 1:26-56

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."

And the angel departed from her.

Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth

all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.

I have a confession to make... I was once a male chauvinist when it came to basketball. I played hoops in High School, and always thought of the girl's game as just a warm-up for the boys. I never really took girl's basketball seriously.. Until one day my little girl put her arms around my neck, planted a kiss on my cheek, and whispered in my ear, *"Daddy, I want to play basketball, and will you please be my coach?"* How could I say no!

I had coached my three sons in baseball, football, and basketball. I was accustomed to coaching boys. But I had no idea just how different the girls' game would be.

I got a feel for what I was in for at the very first practice... Two girls crashed into each other. It was an awful spill. One of the girls was holding her hand, wincing in obvious pain... I thought, *"O no, a broken bone, or pulled ligaments, or a dislocated finger."* I raced to her side, *"Honey, what's wrong, are you hurt?"* She moaned, *"Yes, yes, I did it! I broke a nail!"*

I've now added broken fingernails to my list of basketball injuries. *But that was just a prelude to how different it would be coaching the girls instead of boys.*

I've learned, 12 year-old girls can be *gutsy*, but most of the time they're more *giddy*. They giggle, and laugh, and have fun. Girls don't take it all so seriously.

Boys act macho and tough, and try to better each other, *but the girls just enjoy participating.* It's enough to be a part of the team. Don't get me wrong, girls play hard, but unlike boys it's not life or death. Girls bump into each other on the court, and stop to apologize.

It was refreshing to experience basketball stripped of male egos. I had more fun coaching the U12 *"Lady Lakers"* than I did coaching any team, in any sport.

I share with you my admiration for 12 year-old girls basketball because it helps me to glean a few insights into the mind and heart of a young Hebrew maiden from Nazareth - a young woman named, "Mary."

When the angel announced to her the Christmas news, Mary was close in age to the Lady Lakers. Bible scholars believe if Mary had played girl's basketball she would've played in the 13-14 year-old age group.

My experience with seven sweet, but sweaty little girls, helped me see Christmas from the perspective of Mary. And through *their eyes - through Mary's eyes* - Christmas has looked a lot different to me ever since!

In this morning's text we see Mary's response to the angel's *astonishing announcement* - and then to Elizabeth's *affirming witness*. We get a *glimpse of Mary's perspective*, and a *feel for Mary's emotions...*

In front of the angel, Mary was unpretentious and unselfish. In the home of Elizabeth she was understanding and uninhibited. And this is how I want to spend this and every Christmas... unpretentious, and unselfish, and understanding, and uninhibited.

I want to see Christmas through the eyes of Mary!

First, imagine Mary standing before the angel Gabriel. When we talk of angels, please forget the image of chubby ole Clarence who helped George Bailey in the Christmas classic, "It's A Wonderful Life."

In the Bible angels appear intimidating, frightening, even ominous. Angels are God's warriors. They fight evil forces. In 2 Kings 19 one angel slaughters 185,000 Assyrian troops. Angels execute God's judgment.

An actual angel looks more like a pro wrassler than a plump little cupid. Imagine, the mighty angel Gabriel towering over this scared little girl from Nazareth.

Mary was obviously astonished by the angel's *appearance*, but what really shocked her was the angel's *announcement*. His greeting rattled her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women!" His words were intended to be a compliment, yet they frightened Mary. Verse 29 tells us, "When she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was." The angel had to assure her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Apparently, when Mary saw the angel, her initial impulse was not that God had chosen her for a special honor or purpose. *She feared she was being singled out for*

judgment. That's why Mary was so frightened. Her astonishment came from a sense of unworthiness.

Understand, this Mary had no illusions of grandeur. She understood her humanity, her sinfulness, her dependance on the mercies of God. Mary saw herself as nothing special. "Unpretentious" and "humble" are the words that describe the attitude of this little girl.

And those are words that described the girls on my former basketball team... For years I coached the same age group in boy's hoops, and according to my estimates, by the time a boy reaches 12 years-old he's seen 1,764,943 professional basketball games. Which means when he walks onto the court for the first time he thinks he's the next Lebron James or Stef Curry.

Years ago, when Shaquille O'Neal (aka Shaq), was balling for the LA Lakers, my son Zach, self-changed the spelling of his name from Z,a,c,h to Z,a,q. For a few days at the start of the basketball season we had a Shaq and Zaq. My point is, the term "unpretentious" is not a synonym for 12 year-old male basketball players.

The guys push and shove. They fight to be first. Everyone expects to be the star on the team. When a boy gets the ball he first looks to shoot. *Pass? Why pass?* There's no shot a starry-eyed boy won't take. But not so with girls! They've got nothing to prove. Ego-wise you can't tell the best player from the worst.

This Christmas I want to be a little more like the girls. I'm learning the key to contentment is not in *getting more*, but in *expecting less*. When I front-load my life with expectations - high and lofty goals that this world can't satisfy - I'm only setting myself up for heartbreak.

I think part of the inevitable letdown *after Christmas* is the result of expecting too much *out of Christmas*. For many Americans the Christmas season represents *materialism to the max*. Toys and edibles, glitter and gold - Christmas is about *what twinkles*. We gorge ourselves with everything we believe will make us happy - *and when it doesn't, there's a huge letdown*.

It reminds me of the young man who opened a Christmas gift from his aunt. The look on his face spoke of his obvious disappointment. She told him, "*I'm sorry you don't like my gift...*" He replied, "*It's okay, but when you asked if I preferred large checks or small checks I thought you meant money, not neckties!*"

Bill Adler has a book which contains children's letters to Santa Claus. Let me read you two... First, "Dear Santa: Last year you didn't leave me anything good. The year before last year, you didn't leave me anything good. This year is your last chance. (signed) Bobby." Little Bobby is being just a little too pretentious.

Here's another letter: "Dear Santa: In my house there're three boys. Daniel is two. Jeffrey is four. Justin is seven. Daniel is good sometimes. Jeffrey is good sometimes. Justin is good all the time. (signed) Justin."

And notice, both the letters were written by **little boys**. And these little boys grow up to be big boys, who carry on the same competitive and pompous attitudes. "Oh, I deserve more" or "I'm better than you."

How many boys *and girls* have a similar attitude toward God, that Bobby and Justin had toward Santa? When God doesn't give us what we want, or think we need, we complain. We try to out-do one another and prove we deserve a bigger chunk of God's blessing.

It's pretense! It's a haughtiness. It's an air of self-righteousness and self-entitlement... Pretense is like a pungent cigar in an enclosed room. The haze and smoke billows throughout the room, and suffocates everyone who's not puffing. *Oh, to be like Mary instead!* To open up the windows of humility and gratitude, and let in the fresh air of truthfulness.

This Christmas I'm going to be like Mary. I'm focusing not on what I want, but on what God's already been gracious enough to give me. **Rather than make a Christmas list, I'm counting my blessings.**

I realized that if I never got another gift, God has already done more for me than I'll ever deserve. For Jesus *to die in my place, cleanse me from my sin, and reunited me to God* - that's more than enough to keep me praising and serving my Lord Jesus for all eternity.

Yet Mary was not only frightened by the angel's greeting, she was also shocked by his news... He says in verse 31, "You will conceive... and bring forth a Son, and... call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the highest... and of His kingdom there will be no end." I'm sure the description of her child's greatness would one day stir her imagination and warm her heart, but at that exact moment I'm sure Mary couldn't get over the words, "you will conceive."

Mary asks the angel, *How can this be, since I do not know a man?*... We're told, "The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the

highest will overshadow you; therefore... that holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God..."

Certainly, that wasn't as detailed an explanation as Mary would've liked, but it was enough for her to obey. The mechanics will remain a mystery, but God will work a miracle. And what the angel lacked in specifics, he made up for in confidence. He affirms to Mary the hearty truth, **"With God nothing will be impossible."**

And this little 13 year old Middle School girl replies to God with one of the most beautiful declarations of faith in all Scripture. In verse 38, **"Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."**

When I coached boys basketball I was always harping, *"Set up the offense! Play your position. Pass the ball!"* And it was always, *"Come on coach do we have to?"* But with the girls it's, **"Yes Sir, coach!"**

I could say, *"Girls, stand on your heads and bark like a dog."* And those little girls would still shout, **"Yes Sir, coach!"** The Lady Lakers were **unselfish** players!

Twelve year-old boys *know-it-all*. Challenging authority is their expertise. But young girls don't know all that much about basketball, so they trust the coach. They believe in what the coach tells them - *even to the point of following of his instructions! It's amazing!* This is why coaching girls was such a pleasure. I grew to love those words, **"Yes Sir, coach."** *And so does God!*

That's what I hear Mary saying to God here, **"Yes Sir, Coach!"** Mary, like all young girls had plans, and dreams, and ambitions of her own. For one, she was engaged to be married. She was about to become **"Mrs. Joseph."** She had designs on her future, but Mary realized she wasn't the coach. Mary believed God knew more than she did, so when His instructions altered her plans she responds, **"Yes Sir, Coach!"**

In his book, **"The Jesus I Never Knew,"** author Phillip Yancey makes the following observation, **"Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in her matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost."**

I picture Mary in the huddle with God. *She's wearing her Nikes, her jersey, her gym shorts - her hair is pulled back in a ponytail - she's panting, trying to catch her breath - beads of sweat roll off her forehead.* She looks into Coach God's eyes for his instructions, and believes every word. She then responds, **"Yes Sir."**

Mary knows reproach will come. She's launching into the unknown. Her life will be forever inconvenienced by God's will, *but she trusts her Coach!* Rather than insist on her way, she agrees to play her part on God's team.

And we're in the same huddle! God is asking you and me, "*Will we trust Him?... Will we bow to His desires, and conform to His instructions?... Will we admit God knows more about life than we do... And will we rest in His will even with our questions still unanswered?*" Will the Coach hear "*Yes Sir!*" from us?

In verse 39 the backdrop shifts, and we find the expectant mother at the house of her cousin Elizabeth.

An angel had also visited Elizabeth's husband, Zacharias, and promised he and his wife a son of their own, in their old age. Elizabeth had conceived - it was not a virgin birth, but it was miraculous nonetheless.

Elizabeth became a great comfort to Mary. Beside Joseph, cousin Elizabeth was probably one of the few people who had really believed Mary's story. The two chosen, honored ladies understood each other. They talked, and exchange thoughts, and the three month visit probably seemed like just a few days!

It's just my hunch, but during their 90 day visit, I figure Mary did a lot of listening. Elizabeth was the first to participate in a miracle. She was the older and wiser. Notice, when Mary arrives, after their greeting, she says nothing else. From verses 41-45 it's her cousin who doesn't stop talking. Mary just listens and learns.

Listening and learning and **understanding** is what 12 year-old girls do best. But when you're a boy, and think you're the next Stef Curry what can a fat, old, has-been coach, like myself, teach you. But when I looked into the eyes of those little girls on my team I could tell they thought I was the Kirby Smart of the hard courts. They actually wanted to listen and learn.

The tendency for most of us at Christmas time is to rush through it *doing*, rather than *listening and learning*. When my grandson was three year old he informed me *he knew all there was to know about the Christmas story!* Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men - the Savior's birth - was old news to him.

And a lot of us share his same smug attitude. Christmases happen every year, and somewhere along the line we develop the impression we've grasped all there is to know about Christmas. There's nothing else to learn. **So rather than pause to contemplate, we shop. Rather than probe deeper into its meaning, we shop. Rather than reflect and worship, we shop!**

Once a pastor sent one of the deacons to the sign shop to place an order for a Christmas banner. The deacon forgot the paper where the pastor had written the message for the sign, and its dimensions. The deacon texted the pastor for the strategic information.

When he got the return text he almost fainted. It read, "Unto Us A Child Is Born. Eight feet long. Three feet high." That's quite a newborn! Obviously, Jesus wasn't eight feet tall, but he was indeed *quite a child!*

When was the last time you looked at Christmas in a way which caused you to stop your hurried activities, and made yourself marvel, "That was quite a child!"

I'm sure, during their time together Elizabeth didn't tell Mary anything she didn't already know. She added nothing to the angel's announcement. But as the ladies probed the Scriptures, and saw how recent events had been predicted by the Hebrew prophets centuries in advance, and how their two lives were fulfilling God's predetermined plan - Elizabeth and Mary realized more clearly just Who this special child was, and the ramifications of what He was coming into the world to do! This *enthralled their minds, and thrilled their hearts.*

And this Christmas I'm trying to be like Elizabeth and Mary, and the little girls on my team. I've gone back to basics. I want to see the old, old Christmas story in a new and fresh light. I'm trying to listen again. I hope to rediscover what it's like to be a learner, and eavesdrop in on Mary and Elizabeth's ancient conversation.

It reminds me of *Scott Walker*. Torrential rains flooded his basement. He went downstairs to salvage what he could. As he waded through the water he saw a box bobbing toward the doorway. It was headed outside. Scott splashed his way to save the box.

This box contained Christmas decorations the family had collected over the years. Inside were the mahogany nativity figurines that his parents bought while they were serving as missionaries in the Philippines. The nativity set had been the centerpiece of Scott's Christmas every year since he was a child.

Over the years Scott had taken those figurines for granted - *as well as, the story they represented* - but now as he cradled the box in his arms, he whispered quietly, "we almost lost them, we almost lost them."

This Christmas, I don't want to lose the *mystery and majesty and meaning* of what this season represents!

Finally, when Mary does speak what a burst of emotion pours out of her mouth. Her words in verses 46-55, have come to be called, "Mary's Magnificat." And we could probe their meaning for weeks on end and never exhaust them. Mary's reflections were as pregnant with meaning as she was with child.

I think it's no accident we have "*Mary's Magnificat*," but not "*Joseph's Magnificat*." Both Mary and Joseph were visited by angels. Both were enrolled for a special mission. Both were given specific marching orders. But their responses were so very different... *Joseph trudged off to do, while Mary took time to feel. Joseph sprung into action. Mary sung a song of adoration.*

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not belittling Joseph's obedience to God. We'll spend time on Joseph next week. His actions were also a proper response to the divine visitation. For Christmas is certainly a time to do. It's a time to sacrifice, and serve, and give, and spread the Good News! But Christmas is first and foremost a time to feel. You see it that way *through Mary's eyes*.

Read Mary's song, and it's obvious her three months with Elizabeth were more than a time for doing, or even thinking, *but for feeling*. Her song overflows with emotion. She's **uninhibited** in her expressions.

She begins in verses 46 and 47, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*" Her uninhibited praise reminds me of the Lady Lakers. With those girls scoring a basket - even completing a pass - the smallest victory was a cause for celebration.

I once had a neighbor down the street who decorated his house, his yard, his trees, his fence, his driveway with thousands of blinking Christmas lights. His house became a stop on *The Light Looker's Tour*. *This picture is not of his house, but you get the idea. This is not far off.* Thousands of cars would drive by during the Christmas season to marvel at Alan's lights. In fact, through the month of December every time we came home after dark my kids wanted to turn left, instead of turn right, and drive by Alan's house.

I regret having to say it, but at the time Alan's decorations sort of brought out the Scrooge in me. I questioned the wisdom of his extravagance. Surely, the money spent for all those lights could've been better utilized. What about the electric bill! Deep inside, I resented the attention he was getting from *my* kids.

Several years ago, Alan's Christmas spectacle came to an abrupt end. *He died of a heart attack...* And it got me thinking of what his lights had meant to so many people... *How many smiles had he put on hopeless faces? How much joy had he brought to little hearts?*

When I preached Alan's funeral I talked about his Christmas lights and what they taught me... *that life is more than efficiency and conservation.* It's about wonder and awe. It's about stirring up delight and joy! *Special events call for special celebrations...* Every Christmas **now**, I string a few lights across *my* house. I don't go nuts mind you, but a dark house at Christmas no longer seems fitting even to an Ebenezer like me.

Hey, the first Christmas was not about *efficiency*, but *extravagance*... *A host of angels sing to a few lowly shepherds...* *A celestial body, a star, guides the wise guys...* *The King of the universe is laid in a manger...*

What was efficient about God coming to earth as a man? I'm sure there were easier, more noble ways he could've arrived. But Christmas wasn't about God figuring out the best utilization of resources and manpower. *It was about God devising the most colorful, brilliant, excessive display of love possible!...*

The Almighty joined the ranks of the frail... The All-knowing came to know what it was like to be human...

The Highest and Holiest descended into our muck and mire to show us the way out!... Hey, maybe a few strings of blinking lights and a couple of strands of tinsel isn't such an inappropriate idea after all! Christmas is as much about *feeling* as it is *thinking and doing!* *Its about slowing down and shouting out!*

When boys play basketball they don't smile, or laugh, or chit-chat. The boys are all business. Everybody is trying to be **the man**. *And hug? You gotta be kidding.* If a player sinks a last second shot and our team wins, there's about a three-second window when 12 year-old boys might hug each other... but if they miss that slight crack of opportunity, you can forget it.

Yet the girls... *they want to hug each other after every made free throw!* Boys are staid and somber, while the girls are bubbly, excitable, and spontaneous.

Mary's song is an *eruption of emotion!* She gives God a high-five for His faithfulness! She turns on a yard-full of Christmas lights to celebrate God's mercy!

Did you know that in Brazil they celebrate Christmas with fireworks? I like that idea. Isn't that what God did *when the sky over the fields of Bethlehem opened up and an*

angel chorus sang glory to God in the highest, and informed the shepherds their Messiah had come.

This Christmas, I'm hoping to get a little giddy over God! I've been admiring the Christmas lights. I've been singing more in my car. Yesterday, I took in a little girl's Christmas ballet. Next Saturday I hope to wrap a few Christmas gifts for total strangers. I've yet to walk past a Salvation Army kettle without dropping in a donation.

This year I'm looking at Christmas through the eyes of Mary. I'm feeling my faith - and so far, it feels good!

When the angel visited Mary, there were *queens and kings, prophets and priests* - folks the world considered to be important - who *expected* an angelic visit. But the angel came to a simple, little girl who felt unworthy.

And I believe if we become like Mary - *unpretentious, and unselfish, and understanding, even uninhibited* - we too will set ourselves up for a miracle in our lives...

When you stop living for yourself, and thinking you're *all that* - and realize *God really is all that!*... When you bow your heart, even bend your knee, and say to God, "Yes Sir, Coach..." When you open your heart to *listen and learn and deepen your understanding*... And when you get giddy over God, and become uninhibited in your praise... That's when you put yourself on the list for a divine visitation. Like Mary, God may touch you!

That's exactly what happened to Elizabeth English. She owned a retail appliance store. Elizabeth was about to lock up on Christmas Eve when she noticed a lay-away package over in the corner of her shop.

It saddened her that someone wouldn't be getting their present - but she had waited as long as she could. The next day, Elizabeth just couldn't get into the Christmas spirit. She just kept thinking about that box. For no real reason, she walked down to her store.

When she arrive, two little boys in tattered clothes were waiting on the front steps. The older boy explained that his companion, Jimmy, didn't get a present. He had come to buy him one. Jimmy wanted some roller blades. *Sadly, Elizabeth had sold out.*

Then she thought of that lonely package. She ripped it open, not knowing what was inside, only to discover a pair of roller blades - *exactly Jimmy's size.* She refused the boy's money, and gave them to his friend.

As Elizabeth was locking up she asked the older boy how he knew the store would be open Christmas day? He replied, "I knew you would come. I asked Jesus to send you." Elizabeth felt she had been visited by an angel. She had participated in a miracle. Needless to say, this time she went home in the Christmas spirit!

Always remember, angels appear... *Not to the winners, but to the lowly - not to the selfish, but to the submitted - not to the know-it-alls, but to the listeners and learners - and not to the somber, but to the jolly...*

Divine visitations come to hearts like Mary... and to hearts like the little girls on the [Lady Lakers](#)...

This year, I want to see Christmas through the eyes of Mary... I'm forgetting about winning. I'm admitting my frailties. I'm thanking God for His mercy and grace... I'm bowing my life to God - submitting my plans to God - opening my heart to God... I'm slowing down to learn. I'm enjoying the lights... I'm choosing to be cheerful! *I've already had a few praise eruptions!...*

And this year can be different for you. If you look at Christmas *through the eyes of Mary*... then maybe, just maybe, God might do a miracle in your life!