

The Humility of Mary

by Todd Atkinson

This sermon focuses on the humility and obedience of Mary in response to God's message through the angel Gabriel, highlighting the importance of being ready to serve and listen to God's call, even when it requires significant life-altering changes. The message emphasizes the value of humility in God's eyes, showcasing Mary's willingness to submit to God's will despite the challenges and societal implications. It encourages the audience to embrace humility like Mary did, as a key virtue that allows God to work great things through those who are willing to serve without seeking personal greatness.

Scripture: Luke 1:26, Luke 1:46, Luke 14:7, Luke 18:9, Isaiah 57:15

Topics: "Humility", "Obedience to God's Call"

Description

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Transcript

Nice to see you and what a delight to be able to preach on the first Sunday of Advent. If you are new to our church and new to the church year, then Advent marks the beginning of the church year. The word Advent means coming in Latin and it refers to the coming of the Son of God into the world.

The Advent takes place over a season, the Advent season. It includes the four weeks before Christmas together with Christmas itself and it's a time, as Father Stephen said, of preparation. As God's people in the Old Testament waited and prayed and prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah, so we wait and pray and we reflect upon the spiritual new birth that has been made possible for us by the birth of the Son of God.

And when we first started to teach about the church year, it was wonderful to watch our people take to it. I won't point people out today, though that is my custom, not a welcomed custom, but people, I know we have families in our church that every Advent read a new book on the incarnation of Jesus together as a married couple. And so that they shape up that time of year and they grow in their understanding and what a wonderful and diligent practice that is.

I want to take a look at the passage that David read this morning. It is a familiar one read at Christmastime and it begins with the words, in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God. An angel is a messenger, a messenger from God.

So God has an important message to deliver and he delivers it by means of a messenger. There is a heavenly message being sent by a heavenly messenger and God's message is sent to an unsuspecting and unlikely young girl named Mary. She is unlikely precisely because the message that God had sent her was, Mary you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.

And yet she was not yet married. She may have been young, but she knew generally how these things work in life. That pregnancy isn't something that you can pull off single handedly.

So she asked the angel a perfectly reasonable question. How will this be since I am a virgin? And it's as if God said, well I'm glad you asked Mary. Let me explain to you how this is going to work.

This is going to be a conception unlike any other conception in all of human history. Because this is going to be a child unlike any other child in all of human history. Since this child is going to be fully God and fully man, fully divine and fully human, then it has to be the case that the conception involves the divine and the human, not the human and the human.

This one of a kind child has to be conceived in a one of a kind way. Therefore, verse 35, the Holy Spirit will come upon you. And the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

That, Mary, is how this holy child is to be conceived. Try to grasp the enormity of what is being said to this young woman. God sends an angelic messenger to young Mary, a young woman with normal aspirations in life, and the message to her was essentially God has a plan for you that's going to require you to put all of your own plans to one side.

His plan is going to require you to do something that is humanly impossible, to believe something that is biologically inexplicable, that will be physically rigorous, that will be socially reproachable, emotionally draining, and life-altering. You will never be the same again. How do you respond to a message like that? How would you respond today if God gave you a message like that? A message from God that said life will never be the same.

I have something for you to do, and it will be completely life-altering. Well, let me tell you how Mary responded, and this is precisely why she is held in such high esteem in the church. Verse 38, and Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. Three key words in that sentence. Number one, the word behold.

Behold is a term that expresses a readiness to serve and to listen. I don't think we have a direct equivalent in English, not a single word that expresses all of that. If we were in her place and wanted to express a readiness to serve or listen, we might say something like, I'm fully in.

We might say, I'll do anything you want. We might say, I'm ready and willing. How would you say that in your own words if God came to you and gave you a command that was as epic in proportion as what he said to Mary? What would you express to say, I'm fully in, without reservation, without hesitancy.

I will obey this to the full. But we don't have a single word like behold that says all of that thought. But Mary, just behold, I am ready.

We are called to follow Mary's example in this. You realize, because Mary is the first one to believe that in the promise of the Messiah, it makes her the first Christian. It makes her a pattern and an example for those of us that are to follow.

And she is an example in this, that when God speaks to us, he wants to speak to hearts that say, behold, I am ready to listen. I am ready to obey. There is a readiness inside of us.

Too many times I've tended to respond to God's word with hesitancy, slowness. Reluctance, negotiations, and sometimes even with deafness, when he says something that I don't really want to hear. But Mary, behold, I am ready.

Whatever you're saying to me, there's a readiness to listen, to hear, to obey, not a reluctance. She then goes on to say, I am the servant of the Lord in the original language, the Greek, the word servant here refers to a female slave or a servant girl. That's why it's sometimes translated as, I am the handmaid of the Lord, or I am the maidservant of the Lord.

In Mary's culture, a slave girl was not what her and her peers aspired to become. If you were to ask a first century girl about her hopes and dreams for life, what you would not have heard is, well, I really hope that one day I could become a slave girl. That's what nobody said.

First century Disney movies were about young girls who were servant girls, and they became princesses. They weren't about princesses who really wanted to become servant girls. For some of you, that was facetious.

That probably wasn't first century Disney movies, but if there had been first century Disney movies, nobody would watch a movie about a girl of high standing. They said, what I'd really like to become is a servant. Nobody would pay money to see that.

But Mary wanted to stand before God in the same relation as a servant girl would stand before her master. A servant is one that does the bidding of another, that is given their entire life to do the will of another. A servant says, you tell me what you want to do, and I'll make sure it's done.

That's the language of servanthood. She knew that this was the way to honor the message that was being brought to her. I will be your servant.

Next, she goes on to say, let it be unto me according to your word. Let it be to me means, let it happen to me, or let it come to pass. But it implies that what is about to happen is different from a previous state.

Meaning, I'll obey you Lord, but I'm going to obey you with my eyes wide open, because I realize this is requiring a change. This will bring me into a different kind of life. This is going to be a huge change for Mary.

This is not what she thought life was going to look like. This will be a life-altering decision for her. I think we tend to obey God when God says something that we think will be life-enhancing, make my life a little bit better, but we avoid the things that could be life-altering.

If we think it'll make my life a little bit better, then that's awesome. I will do exactly what you want me to do. But if we think it requires some change on our part, doing things different than we've normally done them, doing things different than we would prefer to do them, but that is the very nature and heart of a servant, is they serve the preferences of another.

They give up their own preferences and love to bring about the preferences of another. And so we obey God when God says, well, I want to do something to you. I think you make your life a little bit better.

Awesome. I am all in. But if we think we have to lose some sense of control in life, if we think we may have to do something that may require some change, some revision of the way that we do life, then sometimes our love for God can plummet and our ears can be deaf.

But Mary was all in, even though everything was about to change for her. Think of what she was submitting to. She knew that obeying God in this would affect her in every way.

It would affect her future. Becoming a mother is hardly a short-term commitment. It would affect her very identity, because after this day, she would hereafter always be known as Jesus' mother, the mother of Jesus.

And that's true for every mother. There is a humility in motherhood where I become the mother of such and such. If she submits to God in this, it's going to affect her reputation.

She's about to become pregnant and not by Joseph, so what's that going to make it look like she's been up to? No good. And how does she explain, I know, it's an angel. Yeah, it's just kind of a God thing.

So she's about to do something incredibly holy, and it is about to make her look what? Very unholy. And she can't even explain it. She is giving up her reputation.

If she says yes to God, she's saying no to her reputation. Even her own fiancé was wanting to leave her, because he thought that she had been unfaithful. So saying yes to this is saying yes to a whole lot of things, a whole lot of life-altering things.

If she submits to this, then she is giving her will over to God. Submitting her will to the will of God. After this, she will no longer be self-determining.

Her plans are laid down. There is no going back. And that's what makes Mary this incredible example.

Her heart. Think of what how this would affect her heart. This was not going to be an easy journey.

And not many years after saying yes to this, she will find herself at the foot of a cross with a heart broken. The only person that did not forsake Christ in the hour of his need was Mary, his mom, broken at the foot of his cross. This is not going to be an easy journey, saying yes.

It's not like it's not going to affect her emotionally. We think if I say yes to God, it'll affect me emotionally in all the right ways, in all the preferred ways. But if I say yes to God, there won't be any sorrow in that.

And I'm not sure what gospel we're reading from. That's not even in the fine print. Mary is, if I say yes to this, there'll be times of great joy, but there'll also be times of sorrow.

And do you know what? Even her own body, if she says yes to this, she is offering to God her very body, her reproductive organs, her very womb is now given over to God. That her body would no longer be her own. That is a message that could not be more opposed to the messages of our society.

And here's Mary offering everything, her very body, her very womb to God. Notice all of this is going to be required of her, and not once do we hear Mary talking about how much she had to give up. Not once do we hear her say about, boy, how much I have to lose, how much I have to lay down.

Not once. To the contrary, notice what she does say when God says this to her. Verses 46 to 49.

Maybe we could get those put on the screen. Now this is her response. So if you want to ask how did that message affect her, what God is requiring of her, her saying yes is going to affect her on every level.

This is her response. It's called the Magnificat. And she says, my soul magnifies the Lord.

You know what comes out of her? Worship. My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

There is joy, not how much I've had to lose and lay down. Immense joy is in her response. Blessed means someone who is considered as fortunate.

Someone who is thought of as favored. So that's how she felt. I am so favored that God would send this message to me.

That God would lay this task upon me. I feel so fortunate. I feel so favored that I get to do this.

But Mary, you realize the whole rest of your life is going to be affected by this. Yes. And I can't stop worshiping him because of it.

What joy he chose me. All generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me. This is a young woman that was indeed looking to be great.

And God did great things for that young woman. Never thought she would amount to anything. And all because of what? There is a word that could be so easy to read over.

But it's repeated in the Magnificat. So that we can't just read it over and miss it. It features not only in this wonderful passage.

It features throughout Luke's Gospel. It comes up again and again as a refrain. And it's this word.

It's the word humble. He has looked on the humble estate of his servant or his maidservant. That describes Mary perfectly.

She is humble. That is why God shone upon her. That is why God chose her.

That explains what God saw in her. In fact, that's what's entailed in the words. He has looked upon.

He has observed this in her. He has noticed this in her. She has drawn the gaze of God, the attention of God because of her humility.

That is a counter-cultural message. We don't draw to people because of their humility. We don't say, what do you most like about that person? I like their humility.

Because a culture of celebratoryism doesn't honor the virtue of virtues, humility. But God honors it. God saw this, looked upon this in her.

This is why she was chosen, in fact, is because she was humble. Humble is a word that we use, but it's not one that we maybe understand. Or aspire to.

When the scripture says that Mary was humble, it means that she was a person of simple origins. It means she was unpretentious. She wasn't trying to impress.

Or to make an impression. She didn't name drop. Well, I was hanging out with Gabriel this week.

That would be hard not to do, because we have a desire to impress, to make our mark, so that people think we're important. Which is the very opposite of humility. Humility is never self-important.

It does not exalt oneself. It is not opinionated. It is not pushy or demanding.

She did not consider herself to be significant or need to be significant. She was not powerful or looking for power. She did not aspire to be a powerful person.

Her goal was to be humble, not to be influential. She did not compare herself with others. She did not want recognition.

And now God has splattered her on the pages of the New Testament. And she has held immense influence. This young woman that wasn't looking for it.

I was reflecting back the last couple days on all the youth events that I preached in the early years of my ministry. All across the Canadian prairies. I think that sometimes my message may have amounted to, you can be great.

You can do great things for God. I think sometimes my preaching may have been an attempt to give them a vision for personal greatness. If I had to go back and do it all over again, I would stand before them and try to inspire them not to greatness.

I would try to inspire them, first of all, to a life of humility, like Mary. Because now I know God does great things for people who are not looking for greatness. God does great things.

Watch the way that these two thoughts play out in the passage. Humility and greatness. Be your chance to have to read them.

God does great things for people who do not need to share in His greatness. Who do not need to be thought of as great. And I would have been in all those youth events talking about humility.

Let's go do amazing things, but let's do it in secret. Let's do it so nobody knows. Let's do it without being recognized.

Let's live humble lives. And watch what great things God will do through humble people that do not need recognition. And they do not need a stage, and they do not need an amp, and they do not need their name in lights.

And they do not need spiritual fame or spiritual celebrityism. I would have inspired them to humility. And I would have tried to let them see the beauty in it.

I think in some ways I was one of the voices that set people up. There's desire for personal greatness, and then they get into life and found out that life didn't actually look like that. And that their desire or quest for personal greatness actually interfered with.

The gospel. And that God actually had to whittle out of them some of the very things that I helped put into them. Why do I say that? Do you know that twice in Luke's gospel? Twice Jesus is recorded as saying these words.

For everyone who exalts himself or seeks personal exaltation will be humbled. And he who humbles himself will be exalted. I would teach people how to humble themselves under the hand of Almighty God.

And in due season, God would raise them up and show His greatness through them. So if you're here today and grew up under my preaching when you were a youth, I'm sorry. Where my message was clouded.

So let me make it clear today. God chose Mary to be the mother of our Lord. He shone on her because she was humble.

He allowed her to do a great thing in His eyes. Something that showed His greatness. Because she did not need to share in His greatness.

She was content to be His servant. And so she was allowed to do truly great things. And when we aren't taught humility and when we don't choose humility, life has a way of bringing our humility about.

And it brings about our humility when we don't choose humility. Then we, it is forced upon us sometimes by humiliation. Humiliation is not the easiest way to humility.

It'll work. So the difference is there's a long road down the side of a mountain. Long, slow, gradual road.

Or you can take the cliff. You'll get there one way or the other. The long, slow road is humility.

The cliff is humiliation. But when we do not choose humility, God in His enormous love, will choose it for us. And He will cause things to happen in our lives that cultivate humility in us.

So the great need to be recognized, He will make us hidden. And the great need for promotion, He will have us demoted instead of promoted. Because He values humility so deeply.

Do you know that when it comes to being like Jesus, we really should aspire to be like Jesus in every way. But do you know that there are very few things that Jesus ever said explicitly, be like me in this way. And you know what they were? Be like me.

I am humble and meek. Learn of me. Humble and meek.

Think through the gospels. In what other place? There are a few places, but there's not many where Jesus explicitly said, I really need you to be exactly like me in this way. But humility, He did.

So what does it look like to have a humble advent? What would it look like to reflect upon the humility of Jesus? Do you understand? This is Jesus. This is the glorious Son of God, who Himself is so humble, that

He will be born into the human race. He will leave the glories of heaven and step into the dirt of the world.

This is the way that the apostles described the incarnation. He humbled Himself and made Himself of no reputation. He took upon Himself the form of a servant.

So do you understand why His mother had to have those same qualities? And do you understand why His church has to have those same qualities? The scripture says God will oppose the proud. He will make sure that we can't move forward. Oppose us.

His hand is up like this. You will find that things aren't working for you in life. He will oppose the proud, but He will give grace to the humble.

Not a small theme in Scripture. The whole prophet Isaiah, that great Old Testament prophet, ends with these words. For I am the high and lofty one, who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy.

And I dwell in a high and holy place with the person of a humble and contrite spirit. I dwell with them. The promises of God's presence are for the humble.

And humble is more than just a disposition of heart. Well I feel humble meaning I don't boast. Humble is more than just a matter of the heart.

Humble is how we treat people, how we think of people, how we handle situations, how we respond to God when He asks us to do something. Whether there's resistance. Resistance isn't humble.

It's arrogant. Some of the church fathers thought of this as did the early rabbis. The chief of the virtues.

Meaning the one that makes the others possible. And so this Advent God is calling us to be like Mary, follow her example. And to embrace humility.

Even though we might not get there the easy way. In fact it might cause you to look back on your story a little different. Maybe you could thank God for some of the tough things.

If they produced humility, maybe we could kiss those things. If they produced humility, maybe we would see them in a different light from now on. And of this Advent if we embrace humility, then watch the things that God will birth in a humble people.

That's the story of Christmas. The things that God will birth. The heavenly things that God will do in the heart of a humble people.

When you get some time, take a look at the gospel of Luke. Two passages. Luke 14, 7 to 11.

There's a passage explaining. It's a parable explaining what the nature of true humility is like. Sometimes humility is best expressed through story.

So Luke 14 and Luke 18. Two parables where Jesus explains the nature of true humility. One who shows up to a banquet and he has to have the most important seat there.

Give me the best seat. The one that's beside the guest of honor. He's seeking a place of honor.

And so what happens to him? The master of the banquet comes and says, whoa, this isn't your place. And he sends them down in front of everybody to the least important seat of the entire table. This is Jesus

talking about how the kingdom works.

He's the guest of honor. Or excuse me, the head of the banquet. And when we don't seek the best place, the place of recognition and honor, then watch what it will make available to us.

Luke 18, take a look at the passage. Take some time about a man that stands before God and he says this, I thank thee, my God, that I am not like these other people. There is superiority there.

And then in the parable, there's a second person. He can't even come up. He just sits at the very back and he just beats his breast.

He said, oh God, please have mercy on me. And this is what Jesus says. Which two of those men did heaven listen to? Which of their prayers did heaven listen to? And it was the prayers of the humble man.

In the words of Indiana Jones, only the penitent shall pass. Let's turn our attention to the Lord's table.

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