

December 8, 2024

Luke 1:39-56

Who was the first Christian? It's an interesting question, and you could probably give several right answers. In a sense, Adam and Eve were the first believers in God, they were the first sinners, and the first ones to hear God's promise that he would send someone to save them from their sin. In a sense, Abraham was the first Christian- God came to him, promised him that he was going to be the father of his chosen nation Israel, and he believed God, and he was saved through that faith- and in a sense we are all children of Abraham since we share that same faith! But who was the first one to know Jesus by name? Who was the first one to worship Jesus as God and savior? Who was the first one to realize that the promise of the savior was coming true? It wasn't Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, or any of the great men of the Bible. In fact, it wasn't a man at all! It was a young woman named Mary in the town of Nazareth. But who would believe her when she started showing signs of her pregnancy? "An angel came to me and said that God is coming into the world, and he's becoming a human being, and he's miraculously conceived inside my womb- that's why I'm pregnant!" "Really, Mary?" Who could possibly understand? Well, her elderly relative, Elizabeth, is also miraculously pregnant as we heard last week. So that's where Mary goes, wondering how she's going to explain this to Elizabeth- but she doesn't need to. As she enters and calls her name, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb for joy as he hears the mother of his Master, and Elizabeth bursts with joy- "Blessed are you, Mary! Who am I that the mother of my God would come to me. You're not crazy, Mary. Blessed is she who trusts the Lord's promise." And all the fear melts from Mary's heart and she blurts out poetry so powerful, so true that her words have been sung by Christians ever since- the first Christmas hymn ever written- the good news of Jesus, **the Gospel according to Mary- 1. Joy, 2. Fear, 3. Humbleness.**

**1. Joy.** Mary here displays what it truly means to be a Christian, and one of the first and primary things a Christian has is joy. You misunderstand me. I guarantee it. Because when most of us think of "joy," we are really thinking of "happiness." But you must understand, Mary's life would not be so happy. In the ancient world, and especially First Century Jewish culture, an unmarried woman becoming pregnant wasn't simply an embarrassment, it was a scandal. And you know how word travels in small towns! She would never be looked at the same way again. Her husband, Joseph, who wouldn't have gone through with the marriage unless God told him what had actually happened, would be laughed at by all the men in town. Mary would lose her friends. She would likely be shunned by her family. And her son would be considered a bastard in the realest sense of the word. *But it didn't matter.* Mary's heart leaps for joy- her soul magnifies the Lord and her Spirit rejoices in God her savior, for God has done great things for her, and holy is his name. Do you see what she's doing? Theology. She is pondering and preaching something specific about God: God is mighty, God is holy, and God is her savior. Mary understands that she is a creature of the all-knowing, all-powerful, infinite creator of the universe and that not only is God powerful, is infinitely, majestically, uncompromisingly good.

Consider what that means- God doesn't get used to sin. When we watch TV and we see violence or immorality or when we hear dirty jokes on the radio, or we hear of crime in our town, we get used to it. Take a moment to consider how many sins happen in your house, on your street, on your TV, in your life, and how you've been numbed from being offended by it. God doesn't get numbed, and because he's infinitely powerful and infinitely good, he is therefore infinitely angry about sin. And Mary understands this well- but she also knows God is infinitely kind and merciful- he's not just a holy God, he's a savior. And Mary finds her joy in the fact that although she is unholy and deserving of God's wrath, he has given her grace and mercy instead, and when you truly understand how big God and powerful God actually is, and how he has forgiven and saved you, you will have joy- even in your darkest days. Do you understand why this is so important for you today? Because we are in the season of unfulfilled emotional desire. Christmas is supposed to be so happy, so exciting, so nostalgic, so sweet, so warm- anyone here get disappointed by it? Statistically, most people are, and many actually grit their teeth to simply get through the holidays because for whatever reason, they are actually quite painful. Friends, don't settle for simple, fleeting, temporary, shallow happiness this Christmas. Don't settle for anything less than joy, but in order to have that joy, according to Mary, we must also have fear.

**2. Fear.** Fear, really? Yes. Mary says that God extends his mercy, his joy, his salvation, all that you need to endure this life with joy, to those who *fear* him. God wants us to be afraid of him? Not exactly. In Psalm 130, it says "With you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared." When the Bible talks about fearing God, it's the idea of awe in the presence of someone so great, so powerful, so wonderful, so terrifying, and yet so beautiful and so good that all you can do is fall to your knees and praise him. That's what Christians should have. How? Because God has kept his ancient promise, and that promise now grows inside Mary's Womb. When Adam and Eve fell into sin and ruined themselves and God's perfect world, God told Satan that someone, someone born of a woman, a descendent of Adam and Eve would crush his head forever. God promised Abraham that this person, although he had no children, would come from his children. And when those children became a nation called Israel, God told Israel throughout the Old Testament that they needed to sacrifice animals for their sins, but also a sacrifice would come to pay for all sins for good. God promised over and over, he's coming, he's coming, he's coming. And yet this person wouldn't be a normal person, he'd be God himself, Immanuel- God with us- and he would dwell with us and be everything we were supposed to be and sacrifice himself- God would leave behind his glory and become a human being, so that human beings could once again share in God's perfect glory. He's coming. He's coming. And Mary feels her womb and realizes- *He's here*. The hands who formed the planets, stars, the mountains are going to be little, chubby baby fingers, and will eventually be pierced and blood will flow for us. The eyes who see the depths of the ocean and the hidden corners of every human heart will have to be closed because the light outside the womb will be too bright for those baby eyes, and those eyes will shed sad, human tears as baby, as child, and as a man whose own people reject him and spit in his face. The voice that called the universe into existence, who said "let there be light," who gave

the Law on Mt. Sinai with deafening fire and thunder, will now cry out for his mother because he will depend on her for milk, and it will cry out in agony, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" as God the Father abandons the Son as if he were every sinner. The infinite, holy God of Heaven has become human and has suffered so his enemies might be forgiven. This is why we celebrate Christmas. This is what fills Christians with joy and fear. This is what Mary wants you to enjoy. And, she wants you to embrace your humbleness.

**3. Humbleness.** Why did God choose Mary for this? What was it about her that he deemed her worthy to be an instrument for such a powerful, beautiful, divine, mysterious, world-changing miracle- God becoming flesh? Why her? Was it because she was connected and wealthy and educated and important? Clearly not. Was it because she was humble, kind, compassionate, and a faithful Christian woman? Some would say yes, but Mary would say, "*Not even close.*" Mary says that God saw her, "humble state," not that she was humble as in not prideful, but that she's a nobody. There's nothing about her that would make God want to choose her for this task. That's the point. I'm sure many of you have seen, or at least have heard of the hit movie, based on the musical, "Wicked." I saw it- it's really good! But I'm astonished how deeply this movie is resonating with people. It's a beautiful story. Elphaba, someone who is rejected, disdained, lowly, unnoticed, mocked, but it's her the wizard wants to see, and it's her who sees behind the curtain and the lies of Oz and her that is special. That's powerful. But to all of you who love that story, I ask you this- what if it were true? What if it were true that the lowly, the scorned, the little people had a value and a worth and that a time would come when the small people would be raised up, the people who are seemingly valueless are valued, and the unnoticeable are noticed? In Christ, it's absolutely true. God uses the weak things of this world to shame the powerful. And he chose Mary to be the instrument through which he came into the world to show that all things, including salvation itself, is all completely by grace. By choosing Mary, God has cast down the lofty from their thrones, sent the rich away empty- Mary isn't talking about "eating the rich"- she's not a socialist. She's showing that God is a God who turns our conception of who is important and who's not, who's in and who's out, who matters and who doesn't, who deserves God and who doesn't, completely upside down. My friends, share Mary's joy and fear this Christmas, and in doing so, you will learn to embrace your humbleness. I've said this before, but you need to hear it. Some of you care way too much about what your followers think about you. Some of you would seriously consider death if you lost your respect and reputation in the community or at work. Some of you are envious and bitter that some people get what you think you deserve. Some of you likely teeter between thinking you're so much more moral and deserving than others and sniveling because they are better than you. But if you are a Christian, none of this is for you. The first Christian was a nobody, and yet was everything to the mighty God of the Universe- so much so that he dwelt within her, bled for her, died for her, and was raised for her and she was filled with joy. The same is true for you and me. Amen.