

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY

I.

There seems to be no end in sight to the debate about the proper role of men and women in American society. It continues to be an issue in the evangelical church. Some partisans use all kinds of evidence to support their views on the subject, no matter how remote the connection. A professor and writer by the name of Alicia Faxon points to the mother of Jesus as an example of an early feminist. She says, "**Mary is the originator of a new order, a new Christian understanding of women. This new understanding liberates women from the concepts of their secondary role in the OT and frees them to express their full humanity.**"

Somehow I have difficulty imagining that Mary saw herself as some kind of feminist, or "originator of a new order." I do, however, believe that Mary has something to teach us, not so much in regard to gender roles as to our role as human beings and as to our need for faith in the God who is there. The lessons from her life that are of greatest value to us focus upon her involvement in the birth of our Savior. So I would like to look this morning at Christmas through the eyes of Mary.

II.

First, let's consider THE BACKGROUND OF MARY'S HOMETOWN. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE BACKGROUND OF MARY'S...) We know that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still ruling over the Roman province of Judea. Most scholars believe that Herod died in 4 BC. So probably Jesus was born about 5 BC.

Nazareth (NAZARETH MAP) in 5 BC was a small town in the north central part of what we know as Israel. Herod the Great was ruling from Jerusalem 60 miles to the south. (NAZARETH MAP 2) He was a vassal king under the authority of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Herod the Great's realm (KINGDOM OF HEROD) extended from the Negev Desert in the south up through Galilee into what we know today as Syria.

Galilee (GALILEE JUDEA MAP), which was a part of the Roman province of Judea at this time, was an agricultural area. It produced olive oil and wine and grain and fruit. Fish came from the Sea of Galilee. Because Galilee was at some distance from Jerusalem, where the leaders of the Jewish faith lived, the Galileans were more lax in their application of Jewish law than were the legalistic priests and rabbis of the south. The Jerusalem clergy association tended to regard Galileans as ritually unclean and therefore less acceptable to God.

(NAZARETH HILL) Nazareth, which is a city today, is located on a hill in the middle of Galilee. It was near a main trade route that ran from Egypt to Damascus. Sepphoris (SEPPHORIS MAP), only four miles away, was Herod the Great's base of operations in Galilee. After Herod the Great's death, there was a revolt in

Galilee against the Roman authority. The Romans came from Syria and destroyed Sepphoris. The Romans and Herod the Great's son Herod Antipas would spend many years after this rebuilding the city. They would provide employment for builders and carpenters from throughout the area, probably including Nazareth. Where, do you suppose, did Jesus and His father find work?

So the residents of Nazareth had some awareness of what was going on in the world. The town also had its own synagogue, and it was a priestly center, which meant that priests from the region would gather there before they went down to Jerusalem.

Nazareth, however, wasn't even mentioned in the Old Testament, and apparently it didn't have a very great reputation. The first reaction of Nathaniel, the future disciple of Jesus, to the Messiah, according to the Gospel of John #1 v. 46, was: "**Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?**" The village was far removed from the center of Jewish life. Nothing of any importance ever happened in Nazareth---- or did it?

III.

Consider for a few moments, then, THE BACKGROUND OF MARY'S FAMILY. (III. THE BACKGROUND OF...) We actually know very little about her family. Most evangelical scholars think that the genealogy of Jesus given in Luke #3 describes the ancestry of Mary. If that is true, then Mary, like Joseph, was from the tribe of Judah and was a descendant of David. Since her cousin Elizabeth was married to Zacharias the priest, Mary also may have had some priestly blood.

It seems that she came from a rather poor family, certainly one that was not well-to-do. Later, when she and Joseph went up to the temple in Jerusalem for the rite of purification after the birth of Jesus, they could not even afford the standard offering of a lamb for the required sacrifice. They could afford to buy only two turtle doves, which was the offering allowed for the poor. Such a poor family could not afford to provide their children with the best that life had to offer. To do a proper job of raising kids it is necessary to have at least a middle class income--- or is it?

Being a young woman, Mary would not have qualified to attend the synagogue school in Nazareth. No doubt Mary came from a godly home. It seems only reasonable to expect that the Lord God would choose the product of such a home to be the earthly mother of Jesus Christ. Her later conduct and the magnificent hymn of praise that she uttered in #1 of Luke seem to confirm that.

In a religious home she would have been exposed to family devotions and the recitation of prayers and Scripture. She would have listened to the religious instruction that came with the celebration of the Jewish feasts. Many families possessed at least portions of the Old Testament scrolls. So she probably had been made familiar with at least some of the Hebrew Scriptures. Out of this environment, Mary developed a simple but deeply-rooted faith in the God of Israel.

IV.

We come then to THE ENGAGEMENT OF MARY. (IV. THE ENGAGEMENT OF MARY) As Mary approached her teen years, one of the biggest things on her mind was marriage. In that culture, most girls were

married at about thirteen or fourteen years of age. The boys were usually a few years older when they got married. Living in a small town, Mary was aware of what the choices were in eligible young men. At some point, Joseph and his parents focused their attention upon this godly young gal. Knowing the quality family from which she came, Joseph's father would have gotten together with Mary's father to talk. Marriages were arranged by parents in that culture. The dads came to agreement on the feasibility of a match, and an appropriate dowry was negotiated. Mary would have given her consent to the arrangement, and a date for the engagement would have been set.

Mary was no doubt excited. Engagement and marriage were highlights of the simple life of these rural villagers. Joseph seemed to be a quality young man. Mary had noticed his faithful attendance at synagogue. Though his family did not have a lot of money, Joseph did have a skill. With his ability in carpentry, there would be enough income to make it as a family.

So the engagement ceremony came to pass. Joseph and his folks came to Mary's house. There was an exchange of vows and gifts. Then Joseph gave her a ring. It was an exciting moment for Mary.

Now they were legally bound to each other. Only death or divorce could break their relationship. Marriage was still a year away, and it must have seemed such a long time to this young couple. The tradition of a year long engagement probably had its roots in a desire to insure the integrity of a wife-to-be. Mary began to count the days until their marriage.

V.

So we come to THE REMARKABLE PREGNANCY OF MARY (V. THE REMARKABLE PREGNANCY OF MARY). Shortly after their engagement, a remarkable thing happened to Mary. The story is recorded for us in Luke #1 vv. 26-29, which is recorded on p. 855 of the black Bibles, if you would like to follow along there: **"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be."**

There is no indication that Mary immediately recognized this person as any kind of celestial being. The thing that troubled her was not his appearance but his statement. There was something about the words of the greeting and perhaps the authority and directness behind them that was unusual. But there was more. According to vv. 30-33 of Luke #1, **"And 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 bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to 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.'"**

Mary knew that the Scriptures spoke of a coming Messiah, of one who would sit on the throne of David. She shared in the hope that this Messiah might come to deliver God's people. Like other Jewish women, the thought may have entered her mind about what an honor it would be to bear this deliverer. But she also knew that such a hope was just a dream. She was an insignificant girl from an insignificant family

from an insignificant village from an insignificant part of the country. But what was this? Was this person saying that she was to be the mother of this deliverer? How could this be? She wasn't even married yet.

Thus, beginning in v. 34, she asks this person a question, **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"** Verse 35 and following: **"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--- the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'"**

This was truly mind-boggling stuff. A baby without knowing a man? How does this person whom I have never seen know I have a cousin Elizabeth? How would he know that she is pregnant? Who is this man? A prophet? An angel? A score of other questions passed through her mind. But in her godly simplicity and humility she could only respond, **"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."** With that, he was gone.

My guess is that Mary didn't tell her parents what had happened. She knew that it was too much for anyone to believe. Maybe she had imagined it all. But after a few weeks went by, she began to notice changes that were happening within her body. She mulled over the words of this person a hundred times each day. She thought about what he had said about Elizabeth. Could her older cousin really be pregnant? Something was happening within her. Maybe Elizabeth would know something more. If Elizabeth was indeed pregnant, then perhaps what the man said was true.

Mary decided to go to her relative. Joseph probably wasn't too thrilled about the idea. She dared not tell him the whole truth, at least not yet. Her parents agreed to let her go. Perhaps she joined relatives and friends headed down (or up--- as they would say) to Jerusalem for one of the feasts. After about a three day trip, she arrived at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, probably not too far from Jerusalem. Luke says that it was in the hill country of Judah.

Beginning in v. 41 of Luke #1 we read, **"And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.'"**

These words and the manner in which they were spoken were unusual. They seemed not to be just the words of Elizabeth. And how could she know that Mary was even pregnant? These words were a great encouragement to Mary. This woman, who was like a grandmother, confirmed what this man, this being, had told her in Nazareth. The next three months that Mary spent with Elizabeth were much needed as she thought about what waited for her back in Nazareth. Elizabeth believed her story, but what about her family, and what about Joseph? No doubt Elizabeth and Mary talked and prayed about what she would do and say when she returned to Nazareth.

Finally, the time came for her to return to her home. Elizabeth was soon due to give birth to John the Baptist, and she would be busy with the new baby. Mary's family and fiancé would begin to become concerned about her if she delayed any longer. So Mary returned to Nazareth.

If her family and Joseph couldn't tell yet that she was pregnant, they soon would be able to do so. Probably she told them the story. Her family probably didn't believe her. There were questions about who got her pregnant. But they were her family, and they were a godly family. So they would love and protect her anyway.

The hardest thing was telling Joseph, her husband-to-be. She could see the disbelief in his eyes. He was a realistic young man. He knew enough biology to know that the formation of a baby required a man and a woman. She could read his mind as she saw him quickly come to the conclusion that something had happened to Mary on the trip to see her cousin down south. Now she was trying to cover it up with some crazy story. Probably he didn't say much. But Mary saw the deep disappointment, and it tore her up on the inside. She must have felt very much alone.

Joseph was an honorable young man, and he set about to divorce her with as little fanfare as possible. There were two options available to one in his situation. He could pursue a public divorce, or a private divorce, which could be done before two witnesses. It was the latter course that Joseph chose. Mary wept and cried out to God. How could she expect anyone to believe such a story? No one else in Nazareth believed her. She was alone.

But she was not really alone. The omnipresent God was in Nazareth. A few days later, Joseph came running to see her, and Mary could tell that something was different. Still out of breath, he told her about a dream that he had the night before. It was not an ordinary dream. It was vivid, and it left such a clear impact upon Joseph that he was convinced that the story was true. This baby was to be Jesus, the Savior, Immanuel. The angel had said to him, **"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."**

Mary was ecstatic. God had answered her prayers. Joseph was now with her in this deal. He quickly set about to have the wedding. It was a hurried affair and certainly nothing like what Mary would have hoped for. People didn't say much, but there was a cloud of suspicion over the whole matter. Joseph's willingness to wed Mary made him look like the guilty man in the situation of her pregnancy. But at least Mary had Joseph in her corner.

Mary had to move in with Joseph's family. That must have been difficult. Mary had to live with a mother-in-law who probably saw her son as having become wrapped around this dishonorable girl's little finger. What an error in judgment they had made in picking her! Her son had done nothing wrong. Initially he planned to divorce this character. Clearly she had gotten pregnant when she was away. But now this little wench had convinced Joseph to marry her. Day in and day out Mary had to live with in-laws who may not have respected her and who probably saw her as bringing shame upon their family. As her pregnancy progressed, other people in this small village began to talk.

VI.

And so we come to THE BIRTH OF JESUS. (VI THE BIRTH OF JESUS) When news about the Roman census arrived, Joseph and Mary may have seen this as a godsend. Probably only Joseph was required to go to the ancestral village of Bethlehem, home of his famous ancestor David. But the couple saw this as an opportunity to make a needed break from their family and fellow townspeople in Nazareth. And so, even though Mary was nearing the end of her pregnancy and going against the advice of her obstetrician, they both left for Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem. (NAZARETH TO BETHLEHEM)

It would have been a three or four day walk for these teenagers. The pictures always show Mary riding on a donkey. That's not impossible, but I suspect that their economic circumstances were such that they walked. It may have been in the winter. Winter there was similar to what we experience in southern Nevada, although they have snow more often than we do. So the teenaged parents of our Lord trudged to Bethlehem, leaving behind disappointed families as they headed for an uncertain future.

(BETHLEHEM) They finally arrived at the village of their ancestor David, a town that neither had probably seen before. Bethlehem today is a small city and part of the suburban sprawl that stretches south of Jerusalem. Then it was a small village. This picture at least gives you a feel for the lay of the land.

Luke tells us that there was no room for them in the *kataluma*. (KATALUMA) The original Greek word *kataluma* is usually translated in this verse as "inn." However, *kataluma* is more often translated as "guest room." There is some doubt that Bethlehem was large enough to have a commercial inn. There was another Greek word that was usually used to refer to a commercial inn. I suspect that Mary and Joseph stayed in a house of some relatives, who were perhaps hosting additional relatives present in Bethlehem for the census. Perhaps there was an old relative or a sick relative who was occupying the guest room. So Mary and Joseph probably stayed in the part of the house where animals were kept, although there is also a strong early tradition that it was in a nearby cave where they were when Jesus was born. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The night finally arrived when Mary was to give birth to Jesus. It certainly wasn't how she would have pictured the birth of her first child. She had not even had relations with her husband yet. She was far from home, and her immediate family wasn't around. It was a scary and painful experience giving birth to her first child. Women too often died in the process. There were none of the singers and noisemakers around that traditionally serenaded the parents of a newborn child, especially a son. But Mary made it, and she was happy just to have this special, healthy son.

But there was more. That same night, these wild-eyed shepherds showed up at the house with a story about angels appearing to them and announcing that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem. They said that they heard and saw a multitude of angels praising God in song. Perhaps their firstborn son had been serenaded after all. All of this was overwhelming to the teenage girl from Nazareth. Luke tells us, **"But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."** Thus was born the Savior of the world.

VII.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- VII. MARY'S LESSONS FOR US) Let's consider, then, MARY'S LESSONS FOR US. First, Mary's behavior teaches us that GOD IS LOOKING FOR HUMBLE SUBMISSION TO HIS WILL. (VII. MARY'S... A. GOD IS LOOKING...) When the angel appeared to Zecharias to tell him that his wife was going to have a son in their old age, he doubted. Clearly he was witnessing a supernatural phenomenon in his experience in the temple. But he had difficulty accepting this supernatural revelation of the will of God. Consequently, he was struck dumb until the birth of his son, John the Baptist. When the angel appeared to Mary, she had questions and confusion. She couldn't put together what was being told to her. But Mary's response was, "**Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word.**"

Part of the reason that the Lord chose Mary to be the earthly mother of Jesus Christ was that He knew that she would be submissive to Him despite what it would cost her, despite the abuse she would take from family and townspeople, despite the uncertainties she would face, despite the aloneness she would feel. She was hardly a model for a modern feminist. She gave up a lot of rights in becoming the mother of Jesus. She gave up the right to a normal wedding, the right to the respect of her in-laws, the right to respect from the people of Nazareth, and most certainly the right to control her own body.

The Lord is looking for that same attitude among His people today, among men as well as women. The people that He generally uses the most are those who humbly submit to His will. It is easy to follow God and do His will when everything is going good. The test comes when nobody else seems to understand, when we feel all alone, when other people are critical, when the pressure is on, when the temptation is strong. Will we submit to the will of God, will we do what is right in those difficult circumstances? And will we do it without a grudging, resentful attitude?

B.

A second lesson that I find in this story about Mary and Jesus is WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN A FAMILY IS THE SPIRITUAL BASICS. (VII. MARY'S ... A. ... B. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN...) What really is important in a family? What did Mary have to offer as the mother of the Savior of the world? Money? Obviously not. Education? Certainly not an education in terms of formal degrees. Exposure to a variety of cultural opportunities? Probably not.

So what did this poor, teenage girl have to offer to the Son of God? A loving, stable home with spiritual instruction and provision for the basic necessities of life. God the Father looked down upon mankind and determined that the best upbringing that the Second Person of the Trinity incarnated in humanity could possibly have was a simple Jewish home that would provide a godly, loving family life.

What does that tell us about our priorities in family life? Anything wrong with an education? No. Anything wrong with money? No. Anything wrong with cultural experiences? No. But if these matters were really of primary importance, the Lord God would have had His son born into royalty or into a priestly family or into the family of a wealthy landowner.

The truly important things in family life are stability, love, time spent with children, spiritual instruction and provision of the basic necessities of life. Too many families offer educational degrees, cultural experiences, money and luxuries in life, but they fail miserably in the areas that really count. They fail to provide a stable, secure family life that is based on Biblical priorities. We need to check ourselves to make sure that we are not majoring on the minor things and minoring on the major things. Mary's example reminds us to keep our family priorities straight.

C.

Thirdly, there is a lesson here for us that relates to Mary's response to Jesus: WE NEED TO TRUST IN THE REVELATION THAT WE HAVE ABOUT JESUS. (VII. MARY'S LESSONS... B. ... C. WE NEED TO...) There was a lot that Mary couldn't figure out about the information given to her by the angel concerning her son. How could she become pregnant when she was a virgin? How could a poor teenage gal from Nazareth receive such attention and honor from God? How could her son lead a kingdom that would have no end? How could this baby in her womb be called the Son of God? How could Elizabeth know about the baby in her womb? What was the meaning of those angels who appeared to the shepherds? (LUKE 2:19) Luke #2 v. 19 says, **"But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."**

There are only a few more brief references to Jesus' mother in the Gospel accounts. But in most of those references we get a sense that Mary is still trying to figure out who this son of hers is. Some of us are still trying to figure out the same thing. (PROJECTOR OFF) How could a virgin be pregnant? How could God become a man? Why is it that the death of Jesus pays the penalty for the sins of the world? How could someone rise from the dead? Why is it that simply trusting in Jesus is enough to give us a ticket to heaven?

We cannot fully comprehend the answers to those questions. But the one responsibility that we have is to trust in the information that we do have about Jesus. Have you trusted Him as your Savior? The Bible says that we are all sinners in need of a Savior. Jesus was the Son of God who became a human being at that first Christmas. He eventually died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of humanity. He rose from the dead to demonstrate that He truly was God. Our responsibility is to trust in this Jesus, to welcome Him into our life as our Savior.

The last mention of Mary in the Bible is Acts #1 v. 14. It occurs after she has seen the crucifixion of her son, and it is after she has witnessed His resurrection and ascension into heaven. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 1:14) The text says, **"All these [referring to the eleven remaining apostles] with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."** I suspect that Mary still had questions. But after everything that she had witnessed, she counted herself as a follower of Jesus. She identified herself as one who had trusted in the God-man Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life. What about you?