

When we need to simply say YES to God

Today, then on the 27th Dec and 3rd Jan we're going to take a look at 3 characters of the Christmas story – Mary, Joseph and Simeon. There are of course many others, each one having an important part to play in “*God send(ing) his only son...*” Why would we bother to look more closely at these characters? Because they are real human beings, utilised by God at an extraordinary time in history, but, whose lives and response to God reflect something of the obedience of God we can learn from, for today.

You know it's always intrigued me how each of the gospel writers captured different emphasis on the birth and life of Jesus, and some of the central (and ordinary) characters as part of that story. Today we're going to look at what Luke can tell us about Mary. Important I say up front the main character is always God, and there is only one King, one person we worship, one trinity, not a quartet.

This message does not reverence or idolise Mary. Mary was a common, ordinary human being called to, and given, an extraordinary task. ¹Mary cannot offer grace, cannot offer salvation. Jesus Christ is the only way truth and life!

As I was contemplating this text I became very aware that we can often overlook the simplest of things God is wanting to reveal to us, because often we're looking for something deep and profound. Like “surely it can't be that simple, Lord?” This is why I've titled this message *When we simply need to say YES to God*.

I want to suggest there's a simple truth found in Mary. I see, when she was presented with a **challenge** she was without pretence, uncluttered in her faith, and simple in her **obedience**. She did not know what saying yes to God meant for the entirety of her life, everything wasn't all figured out, *she said yes anyway*.

She knew there would be a cost. At very least to lay down all that was important to her, for all that was important to God: fully submitted to God's plan. She could not see that the baby born to her would lead to his death upon a cross, but *she said yes anyway*. I want us to look closely at that...

(READ Luke 1:26-38) ²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

¹ In case we're in any doubt...

³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

...⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Most of us will know the story of Mary well, it's worth highlighting the key points though:

Remember these events follow a period of silence lasting at least 400 years. God not speaking. No miracles. No angels visiting. But God was present in the world, and then God visits the earth. What scripture (*specifically Luke*) captures here is the pinnacle of God's redemptive plan for redeeming the world.² All the OT prophecy that points to this time, to the coming of the saviour, the Messiah, the lamb of God, culminates in this moment in history.

It was time to send the saviour. God in his time deciding to come to earth as a man, walk as a man, then die, fully human.

So God visits the earth, by way of the angel Gabriel. It is the same angel whom God sent to Zechariah. Where Zechariah was visited in the temple (Luke 1:11) Mary was visited in Nazareth; an obscure humble village in Galilee, which itself parallels the humble nature of Jesus' coming, birth and life. And according to Luke, Mary is a virgin and pledged to be married to Joseph, who is a descendant of David.³

We read Mary, is "*highly favoured...*" (1:28), not because she is necessarily more special, or less sinful than anyone else, this simply means she was receptive to God's grace. God clearly saw something about Mary and her heart, and she is honoured by God and singled out by God's choosing to extend to her this grace. She has "*found favour with God*" (1:30) the angel said.

The angel is very specific in that she will conceive, supernaturally, given she has had no sexual encounter. He will be a boy, his name will be Jesus, and "*He will be great and...his kingdom will never end.*"

² This is why advent is important and spending time meditating and pausing on such passages.

³ A Jewish marriage involved 2 steps: a. a formal engagement, followed about a year later with a wedding. The idea of waiting the year was to test the commitment of the couple. Luke does not tell us how old Mary was, although we know women were married as young as twelve.

Digress here: no immaculate conception, no virgin birth, no Saviour, no cross and no resurrection, means no, salvation. Jesus' been born of a virgin is central/critical to the gospel. Conceived of the Spirit, born of a human mother. Jesus is born of Mary, but he is the Son of God. He is Gods son. There simply is no good news, no gospel if both are human parents. So Luke doesn't leave us guessing about the majesty of this moment.

He wanted his readers to know this was an angelic moment, a Holy Spirit moment, a God glorifying moment, the commencement of Gods salvation plan. (P) And right at the centre is this young woman. This is a moment in time where the deity of God meets the decision of Mary⁴.

There is only one immaculate conception that results in a son of God being born. This is not going to be an everyday occurrence. But I just love Mary's extraordinary and simple response (to this challenge): *"I am the Lords servant...may your word to me be fulfilled"*

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1. Marys Challenge

...But it wasn't immediately positive. The Bible records *"Mary was greatly troubled at his (Gabriel's) words"* so she needed to think about it, for like a second, it's a lot for a young – let alone any – person to process. *"How will this be?"* she says (speak it). We're not to read Marys response as her being incredulous, it is not that she doesn't believe (like Zechariah)⁵. She believed (v.45). She just doesn't understand how it can all happen. So what's Gabriel's response to Mary?

Well, he starts with talking about Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's (probably in her 70's?) who is barren, yet is already 6 months pregnant and Gabriel says: *"For no word from God will ever fail."* I suspect Gabriel was drawing from the account about Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18.

He's 100 she's 90, God had said they would have a son the following year, Sarah meanwhile is laughing her head off, there's just no way this can happen⁶. Then Gods response: (Gen. 18:14) *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*

The message to Mary and us is this: we're at the mercy of God. Again, Marys situation is extraordinary, but the message applies. God can do anything, he chooses. God is not bound by what we think he can or can't or might or might not do. Gods power has no limits! He is omnipotent, all powerful and without limit and has, does, can and will do anything he wants to do.

⁴ What will she do?!

⁵ He was made deaf and dumb until the birth of John; which was a public testimony of Zechariah's unbelief.

⁶ The Lord said, "I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." (Gen. 18:14)

I heard last week in a message I was listening to that it seems absurd that many (generalising) believe more that nothing met nothing and became something, yet we struggle to believe that God, the creator of the earth, can bring about a virgin birth...

"...no word from God will ever fail." (Luke 1:37). God has and *will never* fail to do anything he wants to do.

Ultimately, Mary's response says something of her depth of spirituality, it indicates why God would have chosen her, what was seen in her, why she *"found favour with God"*. Mary's simple obedience to the Lord, captured in these words: *"I am the Lords servant...may your word to me be fulfilled"* (1:38)

(Bock, D) Mary reflects the person whom God unexpectedly chooses to use. She brings no outstanding credentials...she brings nothing on her résumé other than her availability and willingness to serve. But those characteristics are the most basic ones anyone can offer God. So he puts her to use in his plan, taking her through a process for which she has had no training or preparation. He simply promises to be with her in the journey, and she responds by being willing to go on the ride.⁷

Sometimes we simply need to say YES, to God.

2. Mary's Obedience

Gabriel the angel showed up at God's command, with a plan that humanly speaking seems virtually impossible. Mary, you're not married, but you're going to get pregnant, have a baby, and *btw* that baby, he's the Saviour of the world. I think we can speculate fairly accurately that Mary's plan didn't involve asking God to choose her to bring the Son of God into the world.

I want us to note the simplicity of her response. Not, I don't think so Lord, you'll need to find someone else. Well you know the timings not quite right Lord, I've got a bit on at present, kind of interfering with my plans a bit...*she's not off in a corner somewhere wondering what Josephs going to think? What are his parents going to say?*

She doesn't place before the angel a whole bunch of conditions, i.e. "before I say yes to this God, ya know..." She's not concerned about an explanation for friends and neighbours and church people, she's not worried.

She doesn't ask any of that, she leaves that to God, who she obviously believes can take care of all the details. All she wants to do is please God by doing what he wants. She says, *"I am the Lords servant...may your word to me be fulfilled"*

However impossible this all seemed to Mary, and probably not fully understanding the implications of what's happening, she does understand what must be done. She says

⁷ Bock, Darrell L. "Bridging Contexts" In NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Luke. By Darrell L. Bock, 59. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 1996.

yes, I'll obey what you will Lord. I'll trust you Lord. The what's, the why's, the maybe's, the what-if's (i.e. the circumstances) did not cloud *her willingness to obey*.

Mary will not have seen herself kneeling at the base of the cross and Jesus speaking to her from the cross (John 19:26-27).

She would not have seen herself seeing an empty tomb, encountering the risen Lord and then – and this is ironic – attempting to convince the apostles only for them not to believe... *"their (the women's) words seemed like nonsense"* (Luke 24:11). They couldn't believe Mary, who said 30 odd years before, 'yes Lord'. Her *willingness to obey* wasn't clouded by what she couldn't see.

That's hard for us isn't it, because we want it all figured out, before we step out. But God wants us to trust him from the get-go! What are we seeing as a huge challenge and God is saying back to us, *"nothing is impossible with God"* and he is calling us to obedience in that matter?

What is it that could be clouding our willingness to obey? Inconvenience, messes with my plans, we want to keep some of the habits of the old life, realising actually Gods wants us to leave those behind...?

You know in the Benedictine monasteries of Medieval Europe, a new convert would be given a habit (*robe*) of simple cloth to signify his new spiritual journey...but the street clothes he came there with, weren't thrown out.

They were left in the closet, deliberately, so that every morning when he woke up he saw those old clothes and he would have to make a decision: to continue in his new journey or to go back to his old ways.⁸

Mary experienced the impossible, as possible, with God. She experienced the blessing and favour of God, as she obeyed, God. God may be speaking to you, directing you, showing you what he wants you do, but in your mind, it's not possible⁹. So you keep searching God, putting the question to God, for the thing you want to do.

Faith is not operating in the realm of human possibilities. Faith is operating in the realm of Gods impossibilities. The challenge God has put in front of you, the task you need to do, the ministry you need to start, the issue you need to overcome, the generosity you need to show, your decision is not governed by hard it is, or how inconvenient it is, or how much it costs you. But whether the Lord has called you to do it and being obedient in it.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/swbts/videos/203460831063976/>

⁹ Analysing why and what God is doing can be detrimental to simply trusting God. Particularly when our faith is dependent on the basis of our analysis. Mary's story counters the stance we might take whereby we say "surely that can't be God asking me to ...?" God, can ask whatever he wants, he is God after all!

¹⁰ However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" -- the things God has prepared for those who love him...For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:9-11)

And as Karl Barth says: *each act of obedience by the Christian is a modest proof, unequivocal for all its imperfection, of the reality of what he attests.*¹⁰

We can question God. We can seek understanding from God. We ask for wisdom and guidance from God. Ultimately though, he's sovereign. God owes us no explanation up-front beyond what's revealed in his word to us. He's said it all! His plans are always right. Always good. Always for our good. Always according to his will and his purposes.

(Prov. 16:9) *In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.*

Ian Brown many years ago when he was counselling Karyn and I around a call to ministry, gave us this version of that verse: *"Take care of the things that matter to God and he'll take care of the things that matter to you"*

I think Mary had the maturity to do precisely that. When we do that, that is a modest proof of the reality to which we attest.

Here's the thing: as you face into the challenge/s in front of you, and God shows you clearly in his word¹¹, how are you to respond? There is everything in his word to direct us for any challenge, it is a *"lamp for our feet and a light for our path"*. God owes us no explanation beyond what's revealed in his word to us. God speaking.

It is the same God today, whose plan Mary was a part of all those years ago, who is speaking to you.

Calling you. Directing you. Because he is with you, he is speaking. Are you listening to him? Are you hearing him? Mary was faced with an enormously seemingly impossible situation, she couldn't see ahead, she simply said ok Lord, I trust you. Yes. *"Nothing is too hard for the Lord!"*¹²

What we learn from Mary is very straightforward, ***we face the challenge with obedience***, and that obedience of God is always without condition. How do we know if it is God asking? *Does it love him? Does it love others? Does it align with the word?* A set of questions that help govern our lives.

I recall that Jonathan Edwards wrote a series of resolutions to govern his life. The opening ones are the most memorable. Number one: I will live for God. Number two: If no one else does, I still will. This is so what we need today. A resolve for obedience to God.¹³

¹⁰ A Long Obedience, 167

¹¹ I believe he does...

¹² I wonder sometimes if we're looking for a better, different, easier more convenient answer to his will for us, than is in his word. Let me tell you this, it's not God that complicates our response. It's us. I'm sure none of us want to be held back, prohibiting how God might want to be using us. Remember we're his. We fit in with his plans..."may it be to me according to your word" is what Mary said. I wonder whether sometimes we don't want to believe that what God expects from us so simple, so black and white, and we resist this.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/swbts/videos/203460831063976/>

Mary was a servant of the Lord, willing to do whatever God asked of her. She entrusted herself *fully to God*. Mary met the challenge God gave her, with a response of obedience, **yes Lord**. *What does that tell us?* She was made able by her availability.

So as we look to face into 2021, perhaps it's time we learnt to simply say "Yes, LORD" Uncluttered, without pretence, without conditions, Yes. Yes, I'll do that. Yes, I'll stop that. Yes, I'll start that. Yes, I'll trust you with that situation. Yes, I'll go there. Yes, I'll serve there...obey God! Obedience. Could be seen as a big, heavy, even legalistic thing, but it's all about perspective; how we view obedience.

Eugene Peterson said *"obedience is not a stodgy plodding in the roots of religion it is a hopeful race towards gods promises"*¹⁴ In other words we delight to obey God in all things, and furthermore, it's what we ought to want to do, willingly, thankfully, with gratitude, because of all that has been done for us in Christ.

John 14: 23-24 *Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.*

1 John 5:1-4 *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: **to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome**, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.*

The equation is simple: Christ born of a virgin, Christ who lived and died upon a cross to save us from the penalty of death for our sin, Christ who was resurrected, Christ who sent the Holy Spirit, who is now with us, in us, giving us power...Christ, Immanuel, God with us – is why, we gladly, worshipfully, walk in obedience.

Mary did not know, what laid ahead, but she obeyed. What are we seeing as a huge challenge and God is saying back to us, *"nothing is impossible with God"* and he is calling us to obedience in that matter, and we simply need to say, yes.

¹⁴ A Long Obedience, Pg 168