

Welcome to the fourth Sunday of Advent at New Harvest. This is a marvelous time of the year. To go along with the blessing of this time of year, we get to look at the person of Mary. Everyone knows her. She is the most identifiable character in the Christmas story. This young woman had the privilege of being the mother of the very Son of God. She was the only human present at both Jesus' birth and also a witness to his death. She saw him arrive as a baby son, and she watched him die as her Savior. She understands the full meaning of Christmas. Let's read her introduction in Luke 1:26-38.

Did you know there are fewer and fewer pregnancies each and every year? The birthrate has been dropping everywhere around the globe. Fertility rates in America have dropped from 3.2 children per woman to 2.1 in the last 40 years. It is referred to as a "baby bust" However, I want you to think of Mary as saying "yes" to a baby boom in the person of Jesus. Let's highlight who Mary was in this way:

\* Ordinary- A resident of a small town, Nazareth, a village in the "boonies." She's preparing for marriage as a common young teenager. Her family, as well as Joseph's family, were both poor. It's almost like she is saying, "Why me?" to Gabriel. In Luke 1:48 she said, " ... For he (the Lord) has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." The point is-Mary was a person just like you and me.

\* Favor - Traditional meaning is "freely bestowed." "God has decided to bless you." (Luke 1:30 NLT) The word used by the angel was "highly favored." (verse 28) There were probably countless Jewish girls who could have served to give birth to the Son of God; yet God chose Mary. In her song she understands the wonder of God's grace, "From now on all generations will call me blessed." (verse 48)

Possibly the strongest verse about God's blessing on Mary is verse 35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The idea of this word is referring to being conceived by God, but the term refers to a "cloud covering" you. It's interesting that the statement from the angel means to be enveloped by God's presence rather than using a term that would suggest something sexual. Only the pagan religions had gods having relations with a human woman to bring a divine birth. And when Gabriel says, "The Lord is with you" (verse 28), he refers to God's presence both surrounding her and will be in her.

\* Trust - "May it be to me as you have said." (verse 38) Also, Elizabeth used these words when Mary visited her, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (verse 45) God never forces his love or will on anyone. The implication here is that Gabriel was announcing God's plan and purpose to Mary and it would not be carried out without her consent. She had to say yes, and that's exactly what she did by believing the angel.

Martin Luther, in one his Christmas sermons, said there were three miracles that occurred in Christ's birth: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. The greatest miracle, according to Luther, is that Mary said yes to the "baby boom" found in Jesus.

I believe that Mary's experience was a forerunner to what God would want to do in each of us. Just as Mary received the life of Jesus into the deepest and most intimate part of herself, so too, Christ wants to live in the very center of who you are .

- ✓ Are you ordinary? Is your need for Christ real? \_\_\_\_\_
- ✓ Are you favored by God? Is God offering it freely? \_\_\_\_\_
- ✓ Do you trust him? Are you believing/receiving His invitation? \_\_\_\_\_

Conclusion- O F T which means "often." Since Mary said "yes," there has been a baby boom with hundreds and thousands of people saying yes to the invitation. But these days the birthrate has declined. I am referring to the spiritual birthrate. There is a baby bust in our world as fewer and fewer people are willing to allow the Christ child to be born in them. Jesus said in John 3, "unless you are born again you will in no way see/enter the kingdom of God." "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13) Have you received the Christ child? If not, will you today?

Reflective Questions:

1. What did you learn about Mary through this message? What do you like about her? What other ideas do you have about Mary?
2. Why is Mary such a key character in the story of Christmas? What does she teach us?
3. Ask yourself these questions: Are you ordinary? Are you favored by God? Do you trust him?
4. How are you keeping Christmas Christ-centered? .

### Reading Schedule for December 21-31

The focus of the readings will be around the promise of Jesus and him entering this world as the Son of God. We call this the incarnation, which means “God becoming flesh.” Many of these passages will be familiar to you, but I have found that at this time of the year, it is so important to meditate on the truth you already know. I think God will highlight some principles that will bring out the significance of the season. May these words be encouraging to you and inspire you to draw near to God. (Let me also give you this reminder, you can read through the whole Bible in 2010 as we look at key passages from Genesis to Revelation. I will be using the daily reading schedule from the Life Application Bible, and giving you highlights as you commit to daily reading in the Bible. It is going to be a fantastic year.) As you read these scriptures about Jesus’ coming, I encourage you to pick one verse and really focus on the message God is giving you through the truth of his Word.

- December 21: **Isaiah 9:2-7** – “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (verse 6) There is no question that this verse is what I focused on. These titles mean so much. They describe the fullness of who Jesus is for you and me. The birth of Christ would mean the coming of the one who would be counselor, everlasting and our peace. Which title is most significant to you? Why are you drawn to its meaning? How does it bless your relationship with Christ?
- December 22: **Micah 5:1-5** – Micah was a prophet at the time of Isaiah. They were both receiving messianic prophecies that would not be fulfilled for 700 years. But this adds to the significance of their message. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (verse 2) This ruler is Jesus, the Messiah. Micah accurately predicted Christ’s birthplace hundreds of years before Jesus was born. I like that it says that his origins were from of old. Christ entered human history as a man, but Jesus is eternal. He is the Alpha and the Omega. What strikes you about this prophecy? Which verse stands out to you? What does it mean the he will be their peace? (verse 5) What encourages you about a 700 year old prediction that comes true in Jesus?
- December 23: **Luke 1:1-25** – “And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.” (verse 20) Zechariah was a man of God but he doubted the angel Gabriel. In Hebrews it says it is impossible to please God without faith. Faith moves mountains. Faith changes hearts. Faith is key to our connection with God. How is your faith? What strengthens your faith? What does it mean to be a person of faith?
- December 24: **Luke 1:26-80** – “Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, ‘His name is John.’ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.” (verse 62-64) Zechariah was mute for nine months during Elizabeth’s pregnancy. But when John the Baptist was born and circumcised on the eighth day, Zechariah obeyed the angel Gabriel and named him John. What do you like about Zechariah’s song (verses 68-79)? What does this story say to you about a man named Zechariah? How does God want to renew your faith? How is your heart of praise for God these days?
- December 25: **Luke 2:1-20** – “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’” (verse 10) These are very familiar verses to us. I had you read them on Christmas day and would suggest that you read them to your whole family. Even though they are very familiar words, which words stand out to you? I was obviously drawn to “Good news of great joy.” Good news is really the word for Gospel. Jesus came to build a bridge to the Living God. His entry into the world was the most significant event in history because it set in motion his sacrificial death on the cross and the power of his resurrection. Why is the Christmas story good news? How does it encourage you?
- December 26: **Luke 2:21-52** – “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (vv. 30-32) These are my favorite verses. Simeon, the righteous man who was waiting for the coming of the Messiah, prophesied these words about Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus he knew that this was the Messiah, who came with salvation and would be a revelation to the Gentiles so that you and I could come to personal faith in Jesus. Many thought the Christ had come to save only his own people. Luke made sure that his audience understood that Christ had come to save all who believe, Gentiles as well as Jews. How are you grateful for your salvation? What does it mean that God loves all the world?
- December 27: **John 1:1-14** – You don’t want to miss the powerful words from the Gospel of John about Jesus entering the world as the Word. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (verse 14) This says so much about Jesus. He became one of us. He was and is the Son of God. He has the fullness of God in both grace and truth. People could know God fully because Christ made him visible. Christ is the perfect expression of God in human form. The title “Word” means the revelation of God. How does this encourage you? What does it mean that Jesus was fully God and fully man?
- December 28: **John 1:15-28** – “John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, “Make straight the way for the Lord.”’” (verse 23) John the Baptist is key to the story. He would be the forerunner to Jesus. The statement, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” is exactly what John the Baptist was called to do. He did it very well. He fulfilled his purpose. What inspires you about John? What would you say about his dedication to his purpose? What is your purpose and how dedicated are you to it?
- December 29: **John 1:29-51** – “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (verse 29) The angels announced to the shepherds that Jesus was the Son of God. The wise men brought him gifts. The prophecies were clear as they were fulfilled in Jesus’ coming. But in this verse John calls Jesus the Lamb of God, which would say so much about why he came. Jesus came to pay the penalty for sin and a life had to be given. Jesus was the sacrifice and he became a sin offering for us so that we could receive the righteousness of God. John points to this marvelous truth. What does this mean to you?
- December 30: **Luke 4:1-13** – “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.” (vv. 1-2) As Jesus was about to begin his ministry, there was this time of testing. Jesus would gain a victory over Satan by using the truth of God’s Word. Satan had succeeded with Adam and Eve, and he wanted to succeed with Jesus as well. However, the Lord stood strong and resisted the devil, and based his strength of God. How about you? As we enter the new year, the devil will want to bring temptation and opposition to your life. How will you stand strong? How?
- December 31: **Luke 4:14-21** – “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.” (verse 18) Jesus’ purpose is our purpose. As we close this year, let us thank God for what he has taught us and look forward to how he wants to use us. With an openness to the Holy Spirit, this would be the most significant purpose you could live out . . . doing what Jesus did. How would Jesus want to live through your life this coming new year? What do you remember about 2009 that you are grateful for? What do you remember about 2009 that you want to forget? How do you want to step into the new year?