

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Expect the Unexpected: Heart and Soul
4 December 2022
Lead Pastor Rev. Tammy Long

Scripture Text: Luke 1:26-38

Listen Up: Joseph's Carol https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2-202Rniv4&list=RDV2-102&index=1&utm_source=YouTube%20Search%20Results&utm_medium=Search%20Results&utm_campaign=Search%20Results&utm_term=Joseph%27s%20Carol
radio=1&ab_channel=LightoftheWorld

Sermon Preamble

We experience wonder, awe, and mystery when God does something completely unexpected and then invites us to join what God is doing. We may feel unqualified, not prepared, a little scared. We may be even teetering on the fence of believing or not believing that God is truly asking this of us and leading us to do something. Our response may be a request for God to ask someone else more qualified, more accomplished, more mature, more youthful and energetic, and the list of examples of our responses goes on. We may say, "I am not ready; this is not the right time; I am not the one; please ask someone else." Some unexpected surprises are purely for us, because they are blessings God wants us to experience because God loves us. God also sends unexpected surprises that are assignments and opportunities for good works. God has prepared us to do works as part of our purpose and calling from God. Now we see how God chose Mary for a specific purpose. Mary accepted the call with childlike faith, a willing heart, and a soul on fire.

Mary in the setting of Nazareth

"In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David" (Luke 1:26-27). Nazareth was a rural town of little importance in Galilee. A popular saying in that day was, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Like some towns and cities today, there is a perception, a reputation and often a misconception about the place and its people. God knew Nazareth, and God knew a girl there. She spent her time doing her chores, while thinking and talking to God. What started as an ordinary day for Mary, turned into an extraordinary day because God had a surprise for Mary.

Mary hears that she is a favored woman and the Lord is with her, but she is confused

"Gabriel appeared to her and said, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!' Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean" (Luke 1: 28-29). Certainly, the actual appearance of an angel is confusing and disturbing. She may also be confused and disturbed by the phrase "favored woman."

Status as a favored woman would not have been a typical greeting for a young girl or for someone from Nazareth. Mary belonged to the peasant class. Most of the villagers barely made a living through agriculture and small ventures like carpentry. There was constant strain and struggle on every family just to survive. They bore the weight of a triple tax burden paying taxes: (1) to Rome, (2) to Herod, and (3) to the Temple. Life was dangerous, with uprisings against the Roman occupation and brutal Roman reprisals. Mary saw day to day beatings, men killed in fights with soldiers, and the atrocity of crucifixions. For the angel to say "favored woman" was confusing and disturbing. Mary did not feel favored because she was a commoner.

God chose Mary, an unlikely candidate for God's surprise. No one would have chosen her, but God did.

Mary is confused, but is not shaken by fear

“Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, ‘for you have found favor with God!”” (Luke 1:30). The angel does say not to be afraid. Fear would be a natural human response. Fear does not appear to be her main response. She is confused and disturbed. After this greeting, Gabriel continues with the declaration that Mary has found favor with God.

God’s unfolding plan for the birth of Jesus is unexpected

Just like Gabriel did with Zechariah in announcing the birth of John the Baptist, Gabriel outlines God’s unfolding plan for the birth of Jesus.” You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning salvation. Yahweh saves.

“He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” (Luke 1:32-33). “Son of the Most High” declares that he will be divine as well as human. The throne of David fulfills God’s covenant promise to David that David’s throne would reign forever.

Mary would have understood all those nuances of what is about to happen. As a young Jewish woman, Mary would have known all about the promised Messiah Israel was expecting for centuries. Mary was personally experiencing the oppression and the sins of a broken world longing for a Savior. However, in God’s unfolding plan for the birth of Jesus, the unexpected was about to happen.

Mary’s response of “how can this happen” is different than Zechariah’s response of doubt

“Mary asked the angel, ‘But how can this happen? I am a virgin”” (Luke 1:34). Note the difference between Zechariah’s response to the angel’s declaration, and Mary’s response.

Zechariah had doubts and asked how he could know for certain this is going to happen. Zachariah wanted a sign so he could be sure. His doubts led him to being mute for months. Forced silence was a consequence of doubts and a sign that showed both Zechariah and the community that God was at work.

Mary’s question reflected something different. Mary had faith and natural curiosity, not doubt, about the angel’s words. She simply asked how this could happen. The difference was in how she received the angel’s words. We know this difference because of how the angel responded. When Mary asked how can this happen, the Angel goes on to explain.

Holy Spirit will come upon Mary; power of the Most High will overshadow Mary.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Can you imagine getting news like that? This is a surprise from God!

Think of Joseph. Mary is his fiancé; Mary is having a baby for which Joseph is not the father. Later, the angel also appears to Joseph. This completely unexpected surprise of the Virgin Birth is a lot to wrap your mind around, both then and now.

The Holy Spirit coming upon Mary, and the power of the Most High overshadowing her, brings up images of God’s glory filling the Temple in Moses’ day or like Isaiah experienced in Isaiah 6.

The unexplainable, unimaginable, improbable, and impossible for us is our God

“The word of God will never fail” (Luke 1:37). This statement would have brought to Mary’s mind the impossible birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, when Abraham was 100 years old. Nothing is impossible for God! Gabriel is essentially saying the same thing the angel of the Lord said to Sarah when she had doubt about getting pregnant in her old age. Nothing is impossible for God; for the Word of God will NEVER fail.

As Mary was conversing with the angel, it started to sink in that God was about to fulfill God's promise through her! Today, we remember this moment for Mary as the truth of honor and God's grace, which it was. However, we can miss what was truly at stake for Mary.

At stake for Mary was losing her fiancé, her family, her reputation, and even her life

"She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph" (Luke 1:27). In those biblical days, an engagement was a more binding agreement than it is today. There was an agreement between the families that a marriage would happen, a financial agreement was involved, and it could only be ended by death or divorce. The engagement-betrothal commitment was as solid as the marital commitment.

A betrothal typically lasted for a year; part of the reason for the year period was to ensure the wife's purity. Being found pregnant before marriage would have immediately opened Mary up to charges of adultery as well as cast shame on the family.

The laws of that time put Mary's life in Joseph's hands. If she became pregnant, his traditional options would have been: to divorce her, to send her away, or to turn her over to the townspeople for stoning. Joseph was planning to divorce her quietly, but after his own visit from an angel, Joseph decided to stay committed to Mary.

They both still had to deal with the stigma of scandal. Scandal arises from the snide innuendo and remarks. Scandal arises from the disapproving comments towards Joseph. Scandal arises from questioning of Mary's mental state in believing the child was divine.

As a smart young lady, Mary knew what was at stake and what she could lose: her fiancé, her family, her reputation, even her life. Listen to Mary's response.

Despite the risk of losing much, Mary responded YES to God's angel

"Mary responded, 'I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true'" (Luke 1:38). Wow! Mary said yes to the angel even with all she had to lose. Why did she say yes? The most obvious answers might be: she loved God: she was a faithful and obedient servant. The Israelites had been waiting for a Messiah for hundreds of years. This was an honor and exciting news. With all else happening in the 1st Century, now it was time for the Messiah to finally come. In some respects, how could she say anything other than yes?

However, let's not take too lightly that it cost Mary something. She took a risk. She stepped out of her comfort zone and the safety of the known. Mary was given an unexpected and challenging assignment from God, and she said YES!

There is something about Mary's character, heart, and soul that we can say YES to embrace unexpected assignments God has for our lives

There is so much we can learn from Mary. Her story is so much bigger than a pregnant teenage girl. Mary is not only a devoted mother, but also a devoted follower of Jesus. As his mother, Mary was present at Jesus' birth and also present at Jesus' death; as a devoted follower, it is likely that she was present at His ascension. She was present on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came.

Three things we can learn from Mary – First, Mary had a childlike faith in God

"And (Jesus) said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like the little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 18:3). How do we embrace childlike faith? Childlike faith is a way of looking at the world because we know who our heavenly Father is. Childlike faith is wonder and awe, curiosity, imagination, and possibilities. Childlike Faith simply believes with our heart even if feels illogical. It is not necessary to have it all figured out just with our minds.

We can trust our heavenly Father and experience the wonder, mystery, awe, and curiosity of the unexpected surprises. Just go with it, and see where God wants to lead you.

Three things we can learn from Mary – Second, Mary had a willing heart

“Mary responded, ‘I am the lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true’” (Luke 1:37). Once the angel explained that essentially God would handle it, Mary said okay. She did not need to know anything more than that. Once she heard God would handle that part she was willing to allow God to us her. This was an invitation. Through the angel, God spoke with Mary first. Because her heart was willing to serve God however God wished, her agreement made it a willing partnership.

How might we cultivate a willing heart? A willing heart surrenders to God’s Will. Just say “YES.” Trust in God, the most high. Hold on to God’s Promises. Embrace the Adventure.

Three things we can learn from Mary – Third, Mary had a soul of fire

“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1: 46b-47). This is the opening verse of the praise song Mary sings, known as the Magnificat. Just as Zechariah had a song of praise, Mary also offered a song of praise to God. Listen to the remainder of her song: “For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever “ (Luke 1:48-55).

What is striking about Mary’s song is that she has completely caught God’s vision. God has vision for social justice and equality, for redemption, and to make wrongs right. She realized that she was a participant in God’s plan and story through God’s underserved grace and mercy.

A soul on fire results from worship and rekindling what may have grown cool. As she realized that mission from God, her joy and gratitude erupted into a song of praise. Her soul was on fire. She could not contain the goodness of God!

Every follower of Christ should have that same passion with souls on fire for what God is doing. Let us have souls on fire even for the unexpected surprises that God invites us in to. When gripped by God’s grace and mercy, we catch God’s vision and our mission. We erupt in praise, worship, and telling God’s story. Like Mary, we also can cultivate a soul on fire.

Application – we need others to partner with us on our journey

Mary did not ask for a sign. But the angel gave her a sign to confirm the truth of what the angel said. “What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month” (Luke 1:36). This was bigger than just a sign for Mary. Elizabeth and Mary needed each other.

“Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, ‘God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said’” (Luke 1: 42-45). The baby in Elizabeth leaped when Mary spoke; both women see it as an affirmation of God’s unexpected story at work in their lives. While Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, they were able to support, encourage, and lean on each other. They were able to share together, hope together, and pray together. They had a unique experiential bond; God brought them together.

God partners us with others in our life journey. For examples, God partners Adam and his helpmate Eve, sends disciples out by twos, and creates a posse of Peter, James, and John. God gave Elizabeth to Mary, and God gave Mary to Elizabeth. “A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS

Sermon Preamble

- When has God surprised you with unexpected blessings (a divine hug) purely for you, since God wants you to experience the love of God?
- In contrast, when have unexpected surprises from God been assignments and opportunities to do good works as part of our purpose and calling?

Mary in the setting of Nazareth

- When have you seen God provide unexpected blessings to people in town and cities, like a rural area or a poor inner city ghetto? Has God superseded barriers from reputation or misconceptions about the place and the people?

Mary hears that she is a favored woman and the Lord is with her, but she is confused

- As an ordinary person and an unlikely candidate for God's unexpected surprise, how would you feel if God chose you for an assignment?

Mary is confused, but is not shaken by fear

- Zachariah was gripped with fear at the presence of God's angel. In contrast, Mary is not fearful of the actual presence of the divine, only troubled by the greeting of favor with God. When have you realized that God's grace and love banishes fear from God's continual presence?

God's unfolding plan for the birth of Jesus is unexpected

- For you, what is the significance that Jesus is not only human, but also divinity as the "Son of the Most High?"

Mary's response of "how can this happen" is different than Zechariah's response of doubt

- In what way is Mary's response in Luke 1:34 different than the response of Zechariah earlier in Luke 1?

Holy Spirit will come upon Mary; power of the Most High will overshadow Mary.

- What is the role of the Holy Spirit as set forth in Luke 1:35?

- Luke 1:35 mention overshadowing and identifying Jesus as Son of God. How is Luke 1:35 similar to the parallel accounts of the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, and Luke 9:54?

The unexplainable, unimaginable, improbable, and impossible for us is our God

- In what ways is Luke 1:37 an incredibly reassuring declaration of a biblical principle?

At stake for Mary was losing her fiancé, her family, her reputation, and even her life

- If you declare "Yes" to God's unexpected surprise, what is at stake for you that could cost you?

Despite the risk of losing much, Mary responded YES to God's angel

- What is there about Mary's character, heart, and soul that Mary and us today could say YES to embrace the unexpected assignments God has for our life?

Three things we can learn from Mary – First, Mary had a childlike faith in God

- How can we embrace childlike faith?

Three things we can learn from Mary – Second, Mary had a willing heart

- How might a willing heart surrendered to God's Will produce a partnership with God and others on the mission of God for your life?

Three things we can learn from Mary – Third, Mary had a soul of fire

- In order to cultivate a soul on fire is there something needing to be rekindled that has grown cool?

Application – we need others to partner with us on our journey

- When has God partnered you with others on your life journey?