

Trusting God in the Christmas Story

Luke 1:1-2:20

December 20, 2015

I want to welcome you, again, to our service before the Christmas Day this week. Hopefully, you all are gonna enjoy family and friends this Christmas season. We certainly are. We're looking forward to a great time together. We've enjoyed a wonderful season together, not just in the Christmas celebration this week, it's just been a wonderful season at our church as well.

So many good things going on. Everywhere we look, we're seeing signs of life and growth and health in our church. It's just a great time to be a part of what God is doing here at Grace Church. It's God's goodness. It's evident once again even in the simple fact of his providence that our study of Luke's Gospel has brought us through the infancy narratives just in time for Christmas.

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The elders will tell you, my family will tell you, it wasn't a result of any thoughtful planning on our part to organize the time frame to bring the, the narratives to its culmination here at this time in the season. I believe this is God's idea, a, to have us in Luke 2 at this time in the season. But God has indeed provided us with a perfect buildup for a thorough informed celebration of Christmas.

So for today, on this Sunday before Christmas, we're gonna spend some time thinking carefully about the Christmas story from a certain angle and I hope this is an angle that you will appreciate. Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 2. Luke chapter 2 and we'll once again read the narrative starting in Luke 2:1

The Scripture says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city

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of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him swaddling cloths and laid him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ And the angels went away from them into heaven, the

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shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'

"And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. When they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

You can stop there. This past Sunday, we wrapped up our study of that section. This first Christmas Day. But it took us, it was, it's about a 24 hour period of time, the birth of Jesus Christ, the visit of the shepherds. It took us about four weeks to cover that. There's just so much there. This was the day Jesus was born, the day that the shepherds visited him in Bethlehem.

And we know by comparing Scripture with Scripture that the wise men, of whom we sang and what we read about earlier in Matthew

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chapter 1, the wise men, they didn't come until later. Maybe as much as a year or two later when Mary and Joseph were then living in a house. But this nativity scene that we've read about here, it involves some characters: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, there's some common shepherds there, there's some residents of Bethlehem. Those are the characters who participated in the very first Christmas Day.

The setting for that first Christmas wasn't a comfortable home. Mary's labor and delivery happened in a stable where animals slept. Jesus was quite literally, born in a barn. He can always use that for his mom. Born in a barn? Yeah, I was born in a barn. But that meant that the room in which he was born, it wasn't filled with the smells that we typically associate with Christmas that we'll enjoy in this coming Christmas Day. They smelled animal odors, farm smells.

This poor young couple didn't have the means to enjoy the things that we enjoy at our Christmas celebrations. No fancy foods, no festivities, the simplicity of the setting here, the quietness of mother and child, really the lack of any expectations that

first Christmas morning. The scene was set for a very stark interruption, this visit of the shepherds.

The shepherds had just come from the most amazing and the most astounding experience of their entire lives. Their quiet watch in the dark stillness of the silent night, it had been dramatically interrupted by the blinding light of divine glory, by the loud praise of an angelic army. The angelic announcement of Christ's birth, it sent the shepherds scurrying to Bethlehem. They rushed into town to find this child, to see this sign of this Godsent Savior, Christ the Lord, the newborn baby wrapped, though, in swaddling clothes and lying in an animal's feeding trough.

When they finally arrived, that's exactly what they found. Some of the residents of Bethlehem had followed the shepherds. Shepherds been knocking on doors looking around Bethlehem and their curiosity of the residence had been aroused by this eager relentless search to find this child. And when they all arrived, they heard the most astounding news. The shepherds reported what

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they had seen and heard out on the fields, a visit from the angel of the Lord.

The return of the glory of the Lord to Israel. Get this, after about a thousand year absence and an angelic host praising God. No wonder these people who heard this news were astonished. No wonder, of course they marveled. Dramatic experiences like that do not happen every day. They don't happen even in a lifetime, especially in a sleepy little town like Bethlehem.

But those who heard the shepherds' report, those who heard the report, they were privileged to hear not just amazing tales of angelic visitation, not just amazing stories about divine glory, bright light, blinding light. They were amazed to hear a message and it's the message there in Luke 2:10 and 11. It was a message, as you read there, of "good news, of great joy that's for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The angel of the Lord set the shepherds' expectations about what they would find. And the angel of the Lord gave them a sign to

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seek, verse 12, “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And then suddenly the angel of the Lord was accompanied by a host, an army of angels from heaven in verse 13, praising God, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace among those with whom he’s pleased!”

For those who heard that report, whether or not they comprehended the significance of those words, the text really doesn’t tell us. It simply says, verse 18, that “they wondered.” They were amazed by the report. They were all astonished, but Mary, verse 19, “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” There is a contrast there and it’s between Mary and all the others who heard the shepherds’ report. They were amazed; she pondered.

Let’s back up just a little bit and ponder this, as well. That’s what we need to do is imagine this morning what was going on from Mary’s perspective. Childbirth has to be one of the most intimate and special times in a woman’s life, and a young husband’s life, as well. Mary is there after giving birth and she’s in her quiet birthing room, you might call it. Nothing

more than a stable, really, but it was where she had given birth.

This was where she was recovering. Labor, delivery, recovery, all happened in the same room, in a stable. And this is where she expected some measure of privacy. She wouldn't think anything else. But without warning, a small crowd of absolute strangers interrupted and intruded. And this has got to be a bit uncomfortable for her, a bit of an unwelcome intrusion, right?

After some hasty introductions and after hearing the shepherds' report, Mary was not like the others who heard the report. She was not astonished. She's been the subject of an angelic visitation before, so Mary doesn't marvel. She's not swept away in amazement. Instead, her mind gets to work. She starts processing. She starts thinking.

Mary starts to gather together in her mind all that she's experienced. The word in verse 19 that's translated, treasured, while she certainly did treasure the things the shepherds said, the idea here is really one of gathering together information.

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Compiling is probably a good word there. Upon hearing the shepherds' report, Mary started to compile all the data. Mentally, she's gathering together everything she's heard and seen. Everything she's experience, all she's been exposed to. Everything that's been revealed to her, and she gathered it together because she wanted to think carefully about it.

Mary's attitude of quiet reticence, it may seem a little bit strange at this point. After all, she's just heard some amazing truths revealed about her son lying in that manger from these shepherds. Some commentators describe her behavior at this point with the word brooding. She's brooding over it. Sharp contrast, again, to the outward amazement expressed by the others who heard.

From time to time, the historian Luke, he's the human author who recorded this narrative. He writes in such a way as to call attention to certain details. And here this contrast between the amazement of everybody else in the room and the reticent pondering of Mary. While it is a fact of historical record, he's wanting to draw our attention to something of significance here.

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To us as readers, we're drawn into Mary's meditation. We're drawn into her pondering. We need to think through the significance of all this from her perspective.

Over the intervening two thousand years since the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, there are layers upon layers upon layers of Christmas tradition. And they've shrouded this scene. The more recent commercialization of Christmas has certainly aided. It's done its part to cloud the meaning of what happened that morning. So we here today, we want to return to that scene. We want to recapture some of the simplicity, some of the purity and hopefully, also the clarity that comes from Mary's perspective.

Keep in mind what Mary experienced that day wasn't in any way cozy or comfortable. It wasn't enveloped in Christmas cheer. She didn't have a warm cup of eggnog sitting nearby. She had come through a good bit of difficulty, a good bit of trial. Mary lacked the physical comfort and the emotional stability that most new mothers expect and appreciate during such a trying time. It was not easy for her.

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Mary's joy on that very first Christmas morning, she had joy, no doubt. But it didn't come from physical comfort. It didn't come from personal or material prosperity. Her comfort didn't come from money or status. It didn't come from great food. It didn't come from time with family around the Christmas tree and a warm fire. Her joy was bound up in the message of Christmas, which is, the angels told shepherds this "good news of great joy for all people, all those with whom God is pleased." And certainly Mary is one of them.

If we'll make a similar investment this morning. If we'll consider carefully what Mary endured, the trials of faith that God brought her through. We're also gonna come closer to sharing in the joy of her perspective, which is a long lasting joy, an eternal joy. It's gonna inform our understanding of the Christmas story. It's gonna cause us to rejoice in the deep truths that this story contains. We just need to take the time. And it all started, really, with the visit of an angel, like I said to Mary in Luke chapter 1. Take a look, you can look at your first point in the outline there. It's Mary trusted God through the facts of the Christmas story. Mary trusted God through the facts of the Christmas story.

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What's recorded here in Luke's Gospel, and in other portions of Scripture as well, are, you need to understand this, they are represented as facts. This is not myth. This is not fable. These are historical facts and they call the reader to either believe them as facts or reject them as fiction. But if you ask Mary, and Luke by the way, did ask Mary. She lived these facts and it started with the visit of the angel, Gabriel to Mary's home. Go back into Luke chapter 1, verse 26. Just let's start by reading what happened to her from her perspective. Luke 1:26 to 31.

Look at it 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!' She was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and

bear a son, you shall call his name Jesus.'" Stop there for a second. That's the first fact that Mary had to believe. And it was an astounding fact. This is a big deal because Mary was called to believe here in a virgin conception. Not just that, but a virgin conception in her womb. Not only that, but this is the fulfillment of prophetic Scripture. Here in her life, in her womb.

In Isaiah 7:14, God gave a sign to unbelieving Israel. And here was the sign, "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." We understand Immanuel means God with us. And Gabriel told Mary, you're that virgin. You're the one. Using the same language, he said in verse 31, it parallels Isaiah 7:14, in almost word for word. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."

No one had ever heard of a virgin conceiving, but this is happening to Mary in real time. Here's what Mary believed, not only believed in a virgin conception, but she believed that she herself was this promised virgin of Isaiah's prophecy. It seems

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almost audacious. She had believed that her life would then be the sign of God's favor upon Israel. She believed that her child would be the Immanuel, the God with us. Mary embraced all those facts by faith. No questions. No hesitation at all. She believed.

A second set of facts Mary had to believe and embrace was regarding the nature of the child to be born through her womb. Look at verse 32. "He will be great and will be called 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. And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' 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.'"

Listen, that is the point of Christmas. It's about the Son of the Most High ascending the throne of his father David, reigning over Israel forever. It's about the Son of God ruling an eternal kingdom. You simply have to scratch your head and wonder about

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the origin of the shallow Christmas traditions that really dominate our culture. Santa Claus and toy-making elves. Really? Where did we come up with that? But as Mary is hearing all this for the very first time, the Christmas story to her, it's about God's restoration of Israel. It's about God's subduing Israel's enemies. It's about the ascension of his Messianic king to the throne of his father David. It's about the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. It's about the restoration that's promised all through the prophets, especially in Isaiah.

Listen, to make this immediately relevant for us, it's about today's headlines. It's about peace in the Middle East. That's what the Christmas stories about. The Christmas story is about the ultimate peace on earth. It's about the most fundamental peace on earth starting with the profound level of personal peace with God. The personal level of salvation from sin. And from there, from every heart that puts faith in Jesus Christ, it finds peace with God through salvation. That peace then extends to the four corners of the earth through the prominence and the dominance of the nation Israel.

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As Paul asked rhetorically in Romans 11:15, what does the divine “acceptance of Israel mean if not life from the dead?” Israel right now is rejected, right? Israel is on the outs with God. It’s not gonna be until Israel puts faith in this baby, in this Messiah, that God will come and deliver Israel. But just as God promised Abraham, through Israel, every nation on the earth will be blessed. These are the realities that were converging in Mary’s mind. She was believing God for what he said about her; yes, but also believing God for what he said about the entire nation. This is incredible truth, but she believed it. All the realities that converged in her mind, she believed all of them. Virgin conception, the birth of the Messiah, everything that flowed from that. But there’s more. Gabriel suggested a visit to her formerly barren, older relative, Elizabeth, verse 36.

Mary believed God about that miraculous conception as well. And she went. She affirmed by her actions what Gabriel said in verse 37, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” She believed that. As some like to say, if you embrace the God of the Bible, if you embrace the God of Christianity who’s fully revealed in Jesus Christ, well, nothing he says or does is hard to believe, is it? He is indeed the God of the impossible. You embrace him,

everything he says makes sense. When Mary visited Elizabeth, she heard amazing things there in that home. Prophetic utterances from Elizabeth. She heard profound prophecy from her formerly silenced husband, Zechariah the priest. Even out of her own song, her own words of song inspired by the Holy Spirit, truths came forth. Mary believed it all. As Elizabeth said, Luke 1:45, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mary believed. And as incredible as it all sounded, she embraced everything because Mary trusted the God who revealed the facts of the Christmas story. She believed him. She took him at his word. And that is exactly what God calls us to do, as well. If we're going to enter into Mary's perspective, if we're gonna contemplate what she contemplated on that first Christmas Day, if we're gonna ponder what she pondered, we need to believe the facts that she believed. We need to have the attitude, the orientation of trust that she had in a God who reveals truth. And listen, you don't pick and choose which facts that you'll accept. This is an all-or-nothing proposition. This is a question of supreme authority.

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We either trust the God who revealed the facts, or we reject them. To reject one of the truths he revealed is to reject him entirely. Psalm 138:2 says, "You have magnified your word according to all your name." You know what that means? That means that the truthfulness of God is on par with the nature, or the name, or the character of God. They are inextricably linked together. You cannot separate them. You cannot reject the one without rejecting the other. To reject the part is to reject the whole. But on the other hand, embracing the whole means you embrace every individual part, as well. Trusting God's Word means trusting God. It means trusting his character. It means believing in his name. What he says is tied to who he is.

Miraculous events, predicted prophecy, biblical history, God intends us to believe all of it; every single fact. And when we do, we embrace the God who revealed all the facts. Every single one. And those who trust in him will not be ashamed. They will never be disappointed because God is faithful and true. So Mary trusted God through all the facts of the Christmas story and that's what we do as well. All who belong to God believe the facts that he revealed.

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That's where it starts. But let's consider a second point there in your outline. Mary trusted God through the questions of the Christmas story. Not everything was revealed to her. There were some things that were left unknown. And Mary trusted God through the questions that came through the Christmas story. For every fact that Mary believed, there was a corresponding difficulty that came upon her. Significant difficulty, by the way.

Every fact would not only test her faith in believing the fact itself, in taking God at his word, but also in believing God in the outworking of his promises, the outworking of his plan, and especially as it dealt with her personally. You have to realize all of this was quite traumatic for Mary physically, emotionally, relationally, socially. When God's grace came upon her, it meant some serious, serious disruption on her life.

From conception to childbirth, everything in between, she had walked a very difficult road. It had, no doubt, raised questions for her, especially as she's recovering here from childbirth. These gruff shepherds burst into the room to give their report.

But we need to go back to the opening set of facts that she embraced starting with her conception.

Some people like to point out how this is a teen pregnancy. Technically, it's a teen pregnancy, okay. She was probably 14, 15. That was common, though, for girls at that time. That's when young women got married back in those days. But people like to point out how this is a teen pregnancy and Mary is a comfort to all those who go through that experience in our day. Well, yes and no.

Teen pregnancy today usually means out of wedlock pregnancy, which in many cases is clear evidence that sin has been committed. There are situations where pregnancy is the result of force, the result of deceit or coercion. Obviously, no sin in the conception resulting in pregnancy, but in many cases a pregnant teen is completely unprepared. The circumstances that result in a pregnancy usually indicate some level of ignorance, maybe a lack of self-control, poor planning. There's no marriage covenant, which means insecurity. It means uncertainty. It means fear. None of which is according to God's good design for

marriage, for procreation, for children. And add to that, the guilt and the shame that a teenager experiences. It's also terribly sad.

But that was not Mary's experience at all. She's not like any unwed pregnant teen today. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. She's in a legal covenant, which was as binding then as marriage. You break that covenant through infidelity, you risked stoning. You break that covenant; it took a divorce if it was a legitimate reason. It was a binding covenant. So Mary here rested in Joseph's covenant love. She rested in his good intentions, in his character, in his righteous concern for her. She rested in his undying commitment to provide for her and to protect her.

The two of them together, they conducted themselves in a righteous way, so there was no guilt or shame before God at all. But it's precisely because of that righteous set of circumstances, because of this very situation that the trial this young couple faced together was a such a severe test of faith. It was precisely because of their godliness that the stress and the tension increased. And that was by God's

designed. All of this served to strengthen and increase Mary's faith.

In light of the facts that Mary had believed, virgin conception, the nature of this child in her womb, the revelatory words that came from Elizabeth her relative, from her husband Zechariah, even from her own mouth, the implications begin to mount after Luke 1:56. If you'll notice it says there, "Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months." That's enough time for Elizabeth to give birth to her son, John.

"She remained, remained about three months and returned to her home." Okay, so once Mary returned home, she's about three months pregnant. She started to live out the implications of what has been revealed to her. And here's a short list of questions that begin to pile up in Mary's mind. Questions that challenge her faith, that challenge the faith of this young couple.

First of all, when Mary returned home, as I said, when she gets back from Elizabeth's house, in that visit, she's about three

months pregnant. Would she tell Joseph, or not? That's the first test. Would he believe her when she tells him? What would happen with that relationship? That's not easy for a young pregnant girl to consider. Well, she told him. That created another set of tensions, a whole new trial. Because Joseph heard Mary's news that she's three months pregnant and, oh by the way, it's by miraculous conception, Joseph. By the Holy Spirit! So is he going to believe her story? It's consistent with her character. Or would he believe contrary to her character that she had been unfaithful to him.

We read earlier from the account of Jesus' birth recorded in Matthew's Gospel Joseph was inclined to believe Mary. And that created another trial for him. What would he do about this? What was he gonna do? Once people started to notice Mary was pregnant, people would talk. Assumptions would be made. Accusations would begin to surface, would begin to surface, would begin to be voice, talked about, whispered about, even audibly mentioned. The purity of their relationship would be called into question. The purity of Mary herself.

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Matthew 1:19 we read earlier acknowledges the mental anguish Joseph was going through. It says there, "Joseph, being a just man unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to divorce her quietly." He just wanted to take care of this in a quiet way, protect her dignity as much as possible. Joseph's anguish there represented there in Matthew chapter 1, that had to be rivaled by nobody else except Mary herself.

I mean, think of her. Think of what she was about to endure. She had to be heartsick at the tension that this was creating for her dear Joseph. She didn't want that. She didn't want him to have to fight against this suspicion. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. He resolved part of that tension for him confirming Mary's good character, telling him in Matthew 1:20, "Don't fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Okay, it's exactly as she said. Good. So when Joseph awoke from sleep, verse 24, "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife." And he did that very, very quickly, too. Verse 25, though, hints at another tension. "He knew her not

until she had given birth to a son." They endured that bit of trial as well. They did that righteously. No physical consummation of the marriage. This baby, growing in Mary's womb. The due date is only about four or five months away. People are eventually gonna do the math. When they do talk, they'll tend to impugn their good character. They'll be suspicious. And if they heard the explanation, perhaps they'd be offended about involving the Holy Spirit in this, what appears to be an unrighteous situation.

Even worse if they heard Mary's claim that she is the very virgin spoken of in Isaiah 7:14. Who does she think she is? But God had taken care of that, as well. We read in Luke 2:1 and following, God had already been ordering all things by his good providence. The census decree by Caesar Augustus, the administration of the census by Quirinius in the region of Herod's client kingdom, that district.

Joseph had a legitimate reason to leave, to get down to Bethlehem, to get his pregnant wife out of Nazareth, away from all those curious friends and neighbors. All the family members

to enter into Bethlehem with some degree of anonymity. But again, that created yet another tension for her, another trial for the young couple. Because Joseph, in a very difficult time, had to plan an unscheduled trip right during winter. And rather hastily.

Added to the challenge of this, the logistics there are the needs of a very pregnant, increasingly uncomfortable wife. Joseph obviously wanted to care for Mary. He loved her. At first, he wanted to make sure she's protected and comfortable on the journey, but also, he wants to provide for her along the way, taking care of all of her needs. But then to make sure they're well-situated once they arrive. So after making this arduous, tedious journey, the young couple arrives to find the room unavailable. Whatever arrangements he'd made had fallen through. And he has to get his pregnant wife situated in a stable. Okay. Not the way you want to start your young marriage. Young men, take better care of your wife than that, okay, if you can.

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This is gonna test this young marriage, especially when she's anticipating labor and childbirth, which, you guessed it, adds another level of tension and trial to the story. As I said, childbirth is traumatic. And if there's ever a time in a young first-time mother's life where she wants her family close by, where she wants her mother to be there to accompany her, they're far, far away. Mary is not in her own home. She's in unfamiliar surroundings. She's probably quite lonely.

What comfort can she hope to find from an inexperienced young husband? At least the animals around her, some of them had given birth. I mean, nobody else was going to help. This was not going to be an easy day. But at this point, she'd been through a level of trial and testing that few of us can really understand. Physically, emotionally, relationally, socially, she has been stretched and pressed.

And finally, everything seems to be settling down. The trauma of the childbirth is over. She's gone through the pain. The baby given to her in her arms. She's looking at the baby. She swaddles him, cleans him, sets him down to rest quietly in a

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manger. And it's in those quiet hours she's disturbed yet again. In comes this excited troop of rough-cut shepherds. And they barge right in to share their news, along with half the town, it would seem to her. Like, Who are all these people?

We can guess they're not the most tender visitors. Shepherds are used to brood ewes giving births to lambs all the time. To them it's like, Baby, what? Whata, what's the big deal? Rub some dirt on it. Get back in the game. Come on! They wanted to see this child. They had a news to share. They wanted to tell the story. But however, jarring, or perhaps not so jarring, we're speculating a bit on that point. But however, they entered the room, whatever the manner their visit, the nature of their visit is to share this news, this great joy for all the people.

It may not seem that that was very helpful for Mary at the time. But God had ordained that this is the very thing she needed to hear. The confirmation to the shepherds who came in that day to see this baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. That was their confirmation. That was the sign to them. But you know the confirmation to Mary was what they shepherds said to

her. Prior to the shepherds' arrival as Mary's recovering in that stable, taking in all the ambiance. She's considering what lays ahead.

If it hadn't hit her already, the reality was starting to settle in on her about now. Before the shepherds arrive, she's looking at her baby. She's looking at this promised child that's resting in an animal's feeding trough. And it's a reminder to her of their temporal poverty; how in the world are we gonna provide for this baby? This is the Messiah! What?! I can't give him a better birth than...I can't give him a better living than this. Joseph, what are you gonna do? How many, how many tables and chairs and stuff can you make to provide well for this baby?"

As she looked around, saw her loving, but very young husband, the two of them surrounded by animals. There's no family. There's no friends. It was a palpable loneliness that had to set in for her. Who's gonna help us raise this baby? Who are we to raise the Messiah? Who's gonna help? The words of Gabriel nine months earlier had to be rattling around in her head.

"Greetings, O favored one. The Lord is with you; don't be

afraid, Mary, you found favor with God." Elizabeth told her, "Blessed are you among women."

She's not one to complain, Mary. But having just given birth to her firstborn child, surrounded by animals in a stable, it's a complete reminder of her poverty, paltry means, far from family and friends. She's in an unfamiliar town. She's reminded of their absolute isolation, loneliness. She probably wasn't feeling very favored. She probably wasn't feeling very blessed. This didn't seem to be going according to expectations. All she had to hold onto was what? The promise of God. Was that enough?

You know sometimes, we in much less way than this, but we can struggle with unmet expectations, as well, right? It's on a smaller scale, but it can be just as real for us. Just as painful when things don't work out. It would be hard to believe in light of unmet expectations, or when our expectations are denied altogether. Be hard to remain steadfast and unmoved when we face things we don't fully understand.

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You know God doesn't apologize for any of that and why would he. His plan is always perfect. His ways are always wise. And his character remains, always remains as it has always been, gracious and faithful and full of tender mercy. Even when things aren't making sense, God calls us to believe in him. In spite of how things seem, in spite of the things we don't fully understand. God wants us to trust him, particularly when things don't make sense.

It's not about things working out according to our expectations. It's not about our comfort. It's not about getting what we want for Christmas. It's not about getting what we want out of life. All of this, the good, the bad, everything in between, it's about us getting God. It's about deepening our relationship with the eternal God. It's about learning his ways. It's about discovering and understanding his will, which is revealed to us in Scripture.

It's about us joining his program, rather than trying to cajole him and manipulate him into getting into our program. This "good news of great joy which shall be for all kinds of people,"

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that's good news for only one kind of person: the person that wants God and nothing else out of life. Those who are under divine grace, they are the one Luke 2:14, "with whom God is pleased." Those are the one upon whom his favor rests. Mary is one of those people for whom God is enough. Is God enough for you?

In the midst of all the challenges Mary has faced, God has been gracious to send her, through these shepherds a reminder. He's still at work. Everything is continuing according to his plan. And that's what happened when the shepherds arrived that first Christmas morning. Like Mary, we also need to trust God in the midst of the questions of the Christmas story. Or the questions of God's plan. We believe the facts he's revealed. We trust him to walk us through the variables, the uncertainties of life because at the heart of it all is the reward of knowing him. That's the point.

That's not possible apart from the child of the Christmas story. Look at point three in your bulletin. Mary trusted God through the child of the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph went through

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this whole process together, but they were virtually alone. They had no one to share the experience with. And so God graciously remedied that. He didn't send familiar faces, though. He didn't send friends and neighbors. He didn't send family members. God sent strangers. Some shepherds from the fields surrounding Bethlehem. The comfort he provided for Mary that day, it wasn't the relational comfort she might have hoped for, a familiar face, physical comfort, material means. It wasn't mom showing up with some chicken soup and a warm blanket. God sent her theological comfort. God sent her doctrine. God sent her truths for her mind, for her heart to embrace and believe.

Take a look at Luke 2:8 and flowing through verse 14. It's most likely that Luke obtained the material to write this entire section as he was conducting his thorough research, it's most likely he obtained this material from Mary herself. It's so significant to Mary, she wrote it down. Luke 2:8 to 14 says, "In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were filled with fear. The angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the

people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.'"

After hearing that report, did anything change in Mary's temporal circumstances? Nope, not a thing. Did she suddenly receive a windfall of money? Publisher's Clearing House, Internet Jackpot, something like that? No! Some avenue of means to provide for her baby? Nope. Apparently, the shepherds didn't even help her find another place to stay. She remained in the same temporal situation. And yet, everything had improved for her.

God had sent these shepherds to her as an independent verification of the truth. Everything she heard from Gabriel nine months ago, what she saw and heard in the presence of Elizabeth and Zechariah, all of it is confirmed by these lowly,

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humble shepherds. They had nothing else to contribute to her, except the truth. And that was everything.

Folks, that's the grace of God. Caring for this young girl, strengthening her faith, strengthening her grip on his promises. And for a believing heart, that silences all questions. That removes all dark shadows of doubt because the light is shining through once again. And notice, this truth, it's all focused and centered on one subject: a child. This comfort is Christ-centric. This comfort is Christ-centered. The good news of great joy is for all the people and it's about a Savior who's Christ the Lord.

Back in Luke 1:46, you can look at it there, Mary rejoiced in that same truth. And now she's being reminded of it. She says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in," what? "God my Savior, for he's looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

Look, questions about the means to provide, questions about the relational support that they needed to raise this Messiah; even theological support, even doctrinal support, even though those questions all remained, even though they were not immediately answered, Mary needed to trust God to provide the answers. And God did.

It wouldn't be long before Mary and Joseph, they were staying in a home, probably some where there in Bethlehem, perhaps provided by some supportive believer in Bethlehem, who visited with the shepherds on that first Christmas Day. Perhaps provided by one of Joseph's relatives or something in the area. But to that home, God would send wise men, as we read earlier, the Magi bearing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. That would provide some means for support, wouldn't it? That would help with some of the practical issues of life. God had it all handled.

Forty days after the birth of Christ, Mary and Joseph went up to the temple in Jerusalem to perform the sacrifices required by

the law of Moses. God introduced them to some new friends. A fellowship of true believers. It started with the shepherds, but now it continued; righteous devout old man named Simeon, this widowed prophetess named Anna, and they were people who feared the Lord. People who comforted Joseph and Mary, prepared them for the future.

God knew exactly what Mary needed, what she truly needed at this moment. She didn't need every question about practical means answered. She didn't need all that answered. She didn't need all her temporal situation, circumstance, she didn't need all that solved. She didn't need all the logistics worked out. She didn't need all the family and all the friends that she hoped she would have there. She didn't need that. What she needed most was to trust him. What she needed most was to direct her faith toward the promises revealed. The promises, really, fulfilled in that newborn child, swaddled in cloths, and lying in a manger before her. Mary needed to trust God by looking at the child of the Christmas story. And so do we, beloved. So do we.

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She believed all the facts. She believed God for all the facts. She trusted God in all the unanswered questions. And she put her faith in God through the child that he gave to save her from her sins. Folks, that's what Christmas is really about. That's what this is all about. It's about knowing the God who created everything, who designed everything, the one who brought you into existence. It's about knowing the giver of all things, the sustainer of all things. And get this, to know this God, not remotely, but personally, intimately.

Christmas is about forgiveness and being reconciled to that God through faith in Jesus Christ. Because God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. Along with the Apostle Paul, we here, we are ambassadors for Christ. As though God were making his appeal through us, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. And you do that through repenting of your sin and putting your faith in Jesus Christ.

Mary was reconciled to God because she trusted him. She trusted in his plan for salvation. She trusted in him to forgive all of

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her sins through the child of this Christmas story. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who knew no sin," that's Jesus Christ born in innocence, born in righteousness, who fulfilled righteousness all of his life, obeying every law of God in thought word and deed. He loved the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, in unbroken love, something no one can claim.

He loved his neighbor as himself in an unbroken way, something no one can claim, except him. And God made that one, him who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf. What does that mean? Take all of our sins that we've committed against a holy God, take all those sins, and placed them on Jesus Christ and to punish him instead of us. He didn't deserve it; we do. But he punishes him instead of us.

Why? 2 Corinthians 5:21, "so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." The righteous life that Christ lived, and now has given to us as a gift. We're covered in his righteousness. That verse tells us God is gonna count your sins

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against Christ and counts Christ's righteousness to you. All you need to do is repent, forsake your sin and embrace Jesus Christ.

Forsake your self-centeredness because it's destroying you anyway, and embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord Savior. If you believe, he will save you. Done deal. That is the issue, isn't it? Isn't that? It's an issue of believing God, just taking him at his word. Like Mary, we need to trust God about all the facts of the Christmas story, and everything else besides. If it's written here in his book, take God at his word.

We need to believe him without qualification, without resignation, without hesitation and why wouldn't we? He's all powerful, he's all wise and he's all good. And because of who he is and what he's done for us, we can trust God through all the questions we don't have answered, as well, right? If he figured out the beginning and the end and everything in between, can he figure out the little verities in our own life? I think so.

Mary's faith is truly exemplary, walking through this whole thing, she trusted God implicitly. She teaches us to cling to

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God particularly in the things we don't fully understand. At every point, with every one of God's people, Mary's no exception, God is going to test the faith of every single believer. You can count on it. He creates an uncomfortable tension. He creates a bit of a crisis, and he expects it to press us, to stretch us, always forcing us to ask and answer the question, will I believe him or not? Do I trust him?

For us believers the answer is absolutely! We've entered into a relationship with God through the child of the Christmas story. And it begins with putting our faith in this Savior, who's Christ the Lord. That's how we trust God through the Christmas story. Let's pray together.

Father, we are so grateful that you have sent the one we've read about in Matthew chapter 1, Luke chapter 2. We're so grateful you've sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior and our Lord. He's the Savior who is the perfect lamb, slain before you for the sacrifice that you except for our sins, the only sacrifice, by the way. There's no other name under heaven by which we may be saved than the name of Jesus Christ.

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We put our faith in him, being forgive of all of our sin because you punished him instead of us even though we deserved it. And then you raised him from the dead, approving that sacrifice and you then put, for everybody who puts their faith in Jesus Christ, you cover them with his perfect righteousness. He's completely approved, he's completed accepted before you. He is the one in whom you are truly pleased, Father. And because of him, because we are united to him in faith, you're pleased in us, too. Not because of anything we've done, not because of anything that we are.

In fact everything that we are and everything that we've done merits your wrath, eternal separation from you in hell. But you don't give us what our deeds deserve. You cover us in your love and you cover us in Christ. Thank you for that precious gift this Christmas. Help us to meditate on that meaning and join Mary in gathering all these facts together that we've learned, putting them altogether, connecting all the dots, treasuring them up in our heart and help us to ponder and meditate so that we might worship and praise, in joy, in faith, in full

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understanding. We give ourselves to you completely this
Christmas in Jesus' name, amen.