

# The First Christian

Third Sunday of Advent 2009

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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Today is the third Sunday of Advent, the season in which we prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world. Let's listen to the amazing encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel who brings her some rather astonishing news.

## Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God."

<sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Mary is the first to hear the name of the Messiah. Gabriel told her that he would be called, "Jesus." Mary is the first to hear the good news regarding what Jesus would do; he would establish a kingdom that would last forever. She believed the message she heard about Jesus, which makes her the first Christian. How amazing that this young girl, perhaps 13 to 15 years of age, is the first person to respond to the good news. Let's take a closer look at the message she hears from the angel and how she responds.

Listen to what the angel said about the child who would be born to her. "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Mary must have been astounded by these words: her child would be greater than any king who ever lived. He would reign as king forever. Mary responds: "How can this be, since I am a virgin? I'm only

engaged. I have not consummated the marriage to my husband. I can't possibly be pregnant!"

Gabriel: "You will not need a husband for this child."

Mary: "What?"

Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you. This child will be the Holy One—God himself become flesh."

The Most High God will become a baby. Why would the Creator God of the universe do that? It is impossible to experience an intimate relationship without becoming vulnerable. Sometimes persons are really scared to consider marriage: "I want to marry this person, but I want to be sure he/she will never hurt me." You might want to forget about marriage. There is no way to enter into a marriage or even a friendship without opening your heart to another person and risking that they make break it. Any real relationship carries the risk of being hurt, betrayed, rejected or abandoned.

Christianity is the only religion in the world that says God has made himself vulnerable. God does not love us from a distance. He does not love us in some kind of abstract way. If God is merely the life force of love or a doting grandfather in the sky, then he is not vulnerable. If he is not vulnerable, then we cannot have a real relationship with him.

The claim of Christmas is this: the Creator God of the universe makes himself totally vulnerable—he becomes a baby. There is nothing more vulnerable than a baby. Almighty God put himself in a position where we could harm him, torture him and even kill him. And we did. Why would the God of the Universe do that? Because he came for you and me. He came to pay the price for our sins upon the cross. He loved us so much he became vulnerable so that he could die in our place. "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus became vulnerable and laid down his life for us.

The Bible claims that the founder of our faith is not just a “holy man” or “prophet.” He is God himself become man. If Jesus is who he says he is; you can’t just respect him as a great teacher. If Jesus is who he says he is; you have to fall at his feet and worship him. Our God became vulnerable to us. Even though we hurt him, rejected him and killed him; he has remained absolutely faithful to us. He will never leave us or forsake us. We are totally secure in his love. Because we are secure in his love, we can risk being vulnerable to other persons. Even if they reject us or hurt us or leave us, we have a love that will not let us go. We can survive the hurts of other persons. It is painful when they hurt us, but it will not crush us.

Those of us who have experienced divorce know the incredible pain of having a spouse reject us. Some of us know the deep hurt of being emotionally or physically abandoned by a parent. Some of us know the deep pain of the death of a loved one. Yet in the midst of the grief and pain, the love of God fills us and we survive. We are even able to risk loving again.

Are you afraid to become vulnerable? Are you afraid of the commitment of marriage? Are you even afraid to have a best friend? Then perhaps you need to examine your relationship with God. Take a trip to the manger. See the tiny, vulnerable baby. Take a trip to the cross and see how much God loves you. Open your heart and make yourself vulnerable to God. Receive his love. He will never leave you. He is with you always. He will never reject you or abandon you. You are totally secure in his love. When you are secure in God’s love, you are free to risk the possibility of pain in friendship and marriage. The message of the angel is that we can have a real relationship with God because he became a tiny baby in a manger in Bethlehem and made himself vulnerable to us.

How did Mary respond to this incredible message? First of all she had some good questions! Some people think that Christians are mindless. We don’t ask questions. We

just take a blind leap of faith and trust God. Mary demonstrates that faith and reason go together. She did not turn off her brain when the angel appeared. She did not say immediately to Gabriel, "Wow. You are an angel what do you want me to do? I'll do it." When the angel greets her Mary is troubled and wonders kind of greeting this is. The word "wondered" is an accounting term which means to be fiercely rational, to take stock, to weigh the evidence. She was asking, "What is going on here?" Then she asks another question: "How can I have a baby since I am a virgin?" Sometimes people read stories in the Bible and think these persons are primitive, superstitious and naïve. But ancient people had I.Q.'s as high as or higher than ours. With limited technology and machinery they built incredible buildings. Many of those buildings are standing today. We still do not know for sure how they constructed the enormous pyramids in Egypt. Although Mary is young, she is very intelligent. She questions an angel. Raised in the Jewish faith, Mary was taught that God could not be a human being. For a human to claim to be God was blasphemy. In fact the religious leaders killed Jesus because he claimed to be God and in their eyes that was blasphemy. The barriers she faced against believing in Jesus are just as great as the barriers we face. A combination of evidence and experience shattered her beliefs. And that is the same way it works today.

Some say Christians should not doubt or ask questions. Mary proves that is not true. It is OK to doubt and ask questions if we are genuinely seeking answers. There are some persons who doubt for doubt's sake. They are not really interested in answers. They just want to be skeptical and doubt everything. I've discovered many times that skeptics want to control their own lives. If they admit that there is a God, then they know that he may have different plans for their lives. For them, doubt is a way to keep God out of their lives. Doubt with a closed mind is deadly. Doubt with an open mind is good. Mary was willing to ask questions and listen to the answers. She was willing to change her mind and her beliefs

based upon what she heard. Mary responds to the message about Jesus with genuine questions and an open heart.

Finally we see that Mary responds to the message about Jesus by surrendering to God. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me as you have said." She knows this decision could be costly to her. She is about to have what the world will view as an illegitimate child. She knows Joseph might break off the engagement. She knows that even if he marries her, people will do the math and think that she was either unfaithful to Joseph or that they did not wait until marriage for a sexual relationship. Either of those was strictly taboo. She had some idea of the gossip she would endure in a small town. Yet God had chosen to make himself vulnerable to her. He chose to become a tiny baby held in her arms. Because God was risking himself to her, Mary chose to risk herself to God. Filled with the love of God, she knows that regardless of what happens, she will be OK. God is with her. She may endure incredible pain, but God will see her through.

Gabriel said: "You shall call the child, Jesus." Parents normally have the right to name their own children. Children don't name themselves. The parents are in charge. By telling Mary what name to give the child, it meant that this child was different. Mary would not be in charge of him. He would be in charge of her. He will call the shots. "Let it be to me as you have said." Mary dropped all her conditions. She put everything at risk: her reputation, her marriage, the small town rumor mill. She made herself totally vulnerable to God. She trusted God regardless of what happened.

Many people come to God with conditions. They want to name the conditions in which they will become a believer. "OK, God, I will trust you if you will promise me good health, prosperity and wonderful family." It does not work that way. God made himself vulnerable to us. We make ourselves vulnerable to him. God does not guarantee us

smooth sailing if we open our hearts to him. But he does guarantee us that our sins will be forgiven, that he will love us totally and that he will never leave us or forsake us.

When we open our hearts to him, we have to do so without conditions. We have to let him take the steering wheel of our lives. "God, wherever you take me, I will go. Whatever I go through, I trust you will go with me. And that is all I need to know."

A poor, fifteen-year-old girl trusted Jesus before she had any idea what he could do for her. And she became the first Christian and a part of the greatest miracle of history. We give ourselves to Jesus not knowing fully what it will mean. We make ourselves vulnerable to the God who made himself vulnerable to us. How will you respond to the vulnerability of God?