



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **BETHLEHEM: “For Christ was born of Mary...”**

and gathered all above, while mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love...”

Luke 1:26 *“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

Why did God choose Mary? She wasn’t perfect or sinless. The fact is, Mother Mary was a plain Jane. That may be all God wants some of you to hear. So let me say that to those of you who feel ordinary and plain. The world tells you you’re nothing special and looks right past you. But listen to me: No matter what anyone else tells you about how plain or unsuccessful you are, God would tell you “You’re just right for me, and I’m crazy about you.” God loves to use plain people to point others to Him! That’s what happened at Christmas. God took an ordinary young nobody named Mary in an ordinary town and used her in an extraordinary way. That’s what makes her special. She made herself usable. God chose Mary because she trusted God.

Now, Mary had all kinds of fears. Her initial reaction was shock. For those of us who grew up in church in the Christmas pageants, when the narrator says *“Mary was greatly troubled at the words of the angel and wondered what kind of salutation this might be,”* it doesn’t really cut it. ☺ What Luke really wrote was more like *“she was thoroughly freaked out, confused and disturbed.”* Mary probably thought “Is he out of his mind, or am I?!” Thanks to movie “The Nativity” out in theaters now, you get a renewed picture of what Mary faced: the criticism, the charges of adultery, and harsh judgments by those who thought she was crazy. (Let’s be honest: Who *wouldn’t* have thought that?) But though Mary *had* fears, she never let fear control her. Instead, she lived out the three things you must have in your life in order for God to use you.

You may be here this morning battling for control of your life, in a war between you and your fears. And I hope you win, because your fears will keep you from being used by God to your utmost. So what’s the antidote? 3 things: First, desire to do God’s will. Then, decide to pay the cost, and finally dare to trust His promise. If you build these 3 things into your life, you’ll find God using you in ways you can’t even imagine.

**First, God uses people who desire to do His will.** You can be led around by your fears your whole life. Or, you can be led by your desire to do God’s will. And in the Bible, God uses people who desire to do His will, who say, “God, I really want You first in my life and I want to be what You made me to be.”

If you want to be used by God today, Mary gives us 2 attitudes that you will need:

1. **Enthusiasm:** She says *“My soul praises the Lord, my heart rejoices...”* It’s a lot more than grin and bear it. It’s eagerness. The Greek words “en” “theos” literally mean “in God.” Enthusiasm means “spirit-filled.”
2. **Humility:** Mary says *“My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”* Luke 1:46-48. The point is, none of us deserve to be used by God. Any good we do is a trophy of God’s grace. God blesses us, not because we deserve it, but because God desires it. All you can say is “Thank you, Lord, for working in my life. You didn’t have

to do this!" In these cynical times, when was the last time you allowed yourself to be genuinely enthusiastic and humble?

You know you desire God's will when you're willing to listen to Him every day. You check in with Him, day in, day out. When you get up, you can say "God, what do you want to do with my life today?" Allow your enthusiasm and humility to rule over your fear, like Mary; and desire to do God's will.

What do I desire to do most? What do you desire most in life? To get married? To be financially independent, to make a million? To retire? You had better have a greater purpose in your life than any of those, or you're going to miss the boat. They're fine, but they're *not* your purpose in life. Rather, God's will is the purpose of your life. Jesus said it: "*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these other things will be added unto you.*" It starts with a desire.

**Second, God uses people who decide to pay the cost.** Although your salvation doesn't cost you anything, there's always a cost in following Christ in His plan for your life. If you were to say to God, "In 2007, I give You more of me. This next year I want to be closer to You. I want to be more in Your will, in Your plan, in Your center", it's going to cost you. You're going to have to give up some stuff. You're going to have to step out and do some things in the unknown that you're scared to do, moving beyond your comfort zone.

Mary accepted the cost. She decided she would desire God's will most of all. Mary decided to risk it, and pay the cost. Luke 1:38 "*Mary said, 'I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever He wants. [Have you ever said that to God?] May everything you said come true.'*"

If you were Mary's neighbor, what are the chances you're going to believe her? "Mary, you're a teenager. You're single. You're engaged. You're pregnant. And you're still a virgin? And the father's *God*? Bless her heart..." Can you imagine what the neighbors were saying? "Poor Mary and Joseph! It's so sad. Have you heard the far fetched excuse they're giving? She's pregnant and neither of them will admit to it. They're saying God's the daddy." Mary gave up her reputation because nobody believed her for years. The point is: If you get serious about God's plan, there are going to be people who'll misunderstand you. There will always be a cost to following Christ. Jesus is very up front about the cost. Jesus said, "*No one can be My disciple who doesn't carry his own cross. But don't begin until you count the cost.*" Luke 14:27.

What am I willing to give up in order to be used by God? You will have to give up some stuff. God may ask you to give up some habits. He may ask you to give up some friendships that are pulling you down. He may ask you to set aside your dreams, your ambitions, your goals, your plans, or your finances for His plans.

Step one: Desire God's will for your life more than anything. Step two: decide to pay the cost. That's why "Christ was born of Mary." And,

**Third, God uses people who dare to trust His promises.** The word for daring to trust is "faith." And the good news is, your faith doesn't have to be in the strength of your faith. Your faith is in the strength of God's promises. Jesus said your faith can be the size of a mustard seed, so long as it is faith in God. So, faith doesn't mean you're not afraid; it means you move ahead in spite of your fear. Mary didn't *have* all the answers, but she knew who did, and she trusted Him. Mary had every reason to be worried. God as vulnerable as a little baby, who can't survive if left alone for long. Talk about responsibility! But instead of worry, Mary worshiped. In Luke 1 we have Mary's song of worship. Instead of panicking at the unknown, she praised and prayed.

I want to suggest that to you. When you come upon situations where you think you're in over your head, when you're following God's will but it's scary, don't worry—worship. Don't panic—pray and praise. Claim the promises of God. As the angel said "*Nothing is impossible with God.*" Luke 1:37. And Jesus said even "*What is impossible with men is possible with God.*" Luke 18:27.

Look at this: The Messiah was to be of the tribe of Judah, as prophesied way back in 1400BC in Genesis 49:10, when Jacob is giving his final blessing to each of his 12 sons. "*The scepter will not depart from*

*Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until the Peacemaker comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.*" It's why Jesus is referred to as "the Lion of Judah." But how would anyone prove that? And the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as prophesied in 700BC by Micah (5:2) "*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.*"

How would a poor peasant girl God chooses in Nazareth fulfill God's promises? That people would know he was from the lineage of Judah and was born in Bethlehem? All probability would be that the birth would take place in Nazareth. With her delivery date so near, she wouldn't have taken the strenuous 100 mile trip to the south unless she were absolutely compelled to do so.

Now watch this: Not only do the Hebrew people say it is so; the official stamp of the Roman empire is on the coming Messiah, and Bethlehem shall behold his birth. The regional tyrant, Herod, offends the greater tyrant, Augustus (in Rome). Caesar Augustus, to show his displeasure, orders Herod to conduct a census of all the Jewish people, so he can tax the land. Do you see it coming? The Lord our God can work in spite of even the wildest war mongering dictator. Presidents, dictators, and even what you are facing have no hopes in going against the King of kings. Thus, God sees to it that Herod offends Augustus, Augustus decrees to tax Herod's people, a census is taken, and Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, and Jesus Christ is born according to God's purpose. Jesus is recognized officially as being descended from David by the fact that his mother came to Bethlehem as being of that lineage, remained there, and returned to Galilee without having her claims questioned. How cool is that? It's called the Wisdom of God.

God uses people who desire His will more than anything else in life, who decide to pay the cost, and who dare to trust His promises and step out and do it. And if God can take a teenage girl, a poor peasant teenager, with no education and choose her to be the mother of Jesus Christ, don't you think our excuses are pretty puny for why we're not letting God have all of our life? If God can take Caesar Augustus and the tyrant Herod, and work through them in spite of their opposition, don't you know that God can use you for His purposes in your life? God will work, no matter what. It's up to you whether God works in spite of you, or if God works in you and through you. Mary experienced blessing; Caesar Augustus and Herod experienced nothing...

One thing Christmas is about is that *God* is not limited by *your* circumstances. We often can't see beyond the limits of what we face. But God has broken into history itself; and God can reach you no matter what you are facing. Like Mary, you are important to God no matter how out of place you feel. God is reaching out beyond any situation you are in...whether it is your marriage, your personal life, your career, or your future. Is it old habits that won't die? Is it the trail of broken relationships you've left behind? Is it your own brokenness? We trust God for some things sometimes. We need to trust God for all things, all the time. So think of Mary. And desire God's will, decide now to pay the cost, and dare to trust Him. After all, the stars themselves proclaim his holy birth, "...and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth!"