





Theme: The Wisdom of Christmas
"The Courageously Obedient Faith of Mary"

Weekly Memory Verses:

¹⁸ This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. – Matthew 1:18


Meditation Moments for Monday, December 8 – Read **Matthew 1:18**. Matthew's direct report of what led to Jesus' birth is very matter of fact in verse 18. There are other Biblical stories of God bringing supernatural births. The birth of Isaac to an older Sarah in Genesis 21:1–2. The births of Essau and Jacob to Rebekah in Genesis 25:21. The birth of Joseph who had the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat to Rachel and Jacob in 30:22. And the birth of Samson to Manoah in Judges 13:3. Even among these miraculous births, God does something new in the birth of Jesus. He is born not to someone previously unable to bear a child, but to a virgin. There was no reason for Matthew to describe such a unique event so briefly except that he believed it.


 Matthew seems to have chosen his language carefully. His wording doesn't refer to the Spirit's taking the role of a male in a sexual encounter. Instead, Matthew refers to the miraculous movement of God's creative power. Matthew 1:25 ensures we know that Joseph isn't Jesus' biological father. You may choose not to believe in God at all. But if you believe God created all that exists, and that Jesus died and rose again, why would you find this story difficult to believe?

 Some skeptics say, "So what? The Greeks had myths about gods getting women pregnant." But those were very different from Matthew's account. In the Greek stories, the gods are many. They also are often immoral and impregnate women who are not virgins. Does the uniqueness of Matthew's simple, straightforward account make it easier or harder for you to trust it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the story of your conception is mysterious, as are other parts of your life. I see through this story that you are vastly different from a mere mortal like me, and I should expect the unexplainable from you. Amen.


Tuesday, December 9 – Read **Luke 2:22-38**. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple for “ritual cleansing” because they were devout Jews. Childbearing wasn’t a sin, but the ritual impurity resulting from it required an offering according to Leviticus 12:6-8. After the 33 days are up, Mary offers a pair of birds which is the animal sacrifice that verse 8 tells us the poor could give. Their offering of the alternate sacrifice available for the poor is another detail that reminds us of the humble circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth.


 Simeon, devout and aged, amazed Joseph and Mary. Pastor John Killinger in his book *A Devotional Guide to Luke* writes, “Simeon’s prophecy, composed largely of allusions to Isaiah 40-55, is remarkable for two things: it forecasts the universal mission of Jesus (he is to be ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles’) and it predicts the stormy, uneasy nature of the mission, including the pain that will pierce the soul of Mary herself when Jesus is crucified.” Sometimes we want festivity to be all there is to Christmas. Would Simeon’s words spoil that?

 These young parents of Jesus, baby in arms, met two old people nearing the end of their lives. N.T. Wright notes in his commentary *Luke for Everyone*, “We have the old man and woman, waiting their turn to die, worshipping God night and day and praying for the salvation of his people. Luke wants to draw readers of every age and stage of life into his picture. No matter who or where you are, the story of Jesus, from the feeding-trough in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story.” Are you open to making it your story this Advent (the four weeks before Christmas)?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, Simeon sensed the raw courage you showed in coming into a world that would too often reject and hate you. Thank you for the steely love you had from the moment you entered our broken world. Amen.*

Wednesday, December 10 – Read **Mark 3:21 and 31-34**. Jesus should have had a perfect family life, right? But at least one time Jesus’ mother and brothers tried to alter how he went about his mission. The religious leaders who claimed Jesus was in league with the ruler of demons may have influenced them. John 2:1-2 and 12 tells us that Jesus was loyal to his family, but ultimately loyal to God’s mission. Jesus’ example reminds us that if we must choose, our highest loyalty is to God and the person God made us to be, even beyond our family.


 N.T. Write notes in his commentary *Mark for Everyone*, “Despite what pious Christian traditions have at times said about Mary, Jesus’ mother, at this stage at least she clearly didn’t have any idea what he was up to. She had brought the rest of the family... to take him away, to stop him behaving in such an outrageous fashion, bringing dishonor to the family name. They thought he was mad.... [Jesus] has a different vocation, a different mission.” What made it important for Mary to move spiritually from “mother” to “disciple”?


 Jesus did not “disown” his human family or sever all connections. Far from it as 1 Corinthians 15:7 gives us details about his relationship with his brother James. But he meant it when he used family language to describe his bond with all of those

who do God's will, and he wanted Mary to grasp this idea. Psychologists say people who follow their highest values, even if those upset others, are "inner-directed." Why did Jesus have to be inner-directed to carry out his mission? When have spiritual "family members" blessed you?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you lived through the pain of misunderstandings and the beauty of caring and loving. Shape me into a person who maximizes the beauty of all the relationships I'm a part of. Amen.*


Thursday, December 11 – Read **Matthew 13:54-57**. Due to centuries of Christian tradition, we sometimes assume that Jesus and his family always had haloes around their heads, clearly superior to everyone else. But that would not have fit with the reality of Jesus' mission that we read about in Philippians 2:5-8. In fact, when Jesus went to his hometown, many people responded by saying, in effect, "Who does he think he is? We know his mother and brothers—they're nothing special." That must have pained Mary as much or more than it did Jesus.

 Those in the synagogue name Jesus' family as proof that he isn't anyone special. Recall that status in the ancient world was based less on one's accomplishments and more on one's family roots. If you were God, would you choose to come as the Messiah to a family as poor and "ordinary" as Mary and Joseph's, rather than to a prominent, powerful, highly respected and respectable family? What are some of the keyways God's values challenge yours?

 N.T. Wright in his commentary *Matthew for Everyone* writes, "Matthew places this incident right after the long series of Jesus' parables of the kingdom, and it's a stark warning to anyone who might suppose that Jesus' teaching was meant to be a matter of simple and straightforward lessons about life, morality, spirituality or whatever, that anyone with half a brain would pick up easily. Far from it. This 'teaching', if we want to call it that, is shocking, explosive and dangerous." In what ways has Jesus' message had an "explosive" effect on you?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you were not seen by the people of your day as a great man, but you changed our ideas of true greatness. Change any of my ideas that don't fit in your kingdom. Amen.*

Friday, December 12 – Read **Matthew 27:55-61**. The crucifixion was over; Jesus was dead. We now call that day "Good Friday," but there was nothing about it that felt good to Jesus' followers as it happened. The boastful male disciples in Matthew 26:35 had all faded into hiding. But many of the women were still there, almost certainly including Jesus' mother Mary. Matthew 13:55 said she had sons named James and Joseph. She had accepted God's call to bring Jesus into the world—she wasn't going to quit now.

 Many tried hard to refute Christians' claims that Jesus rose from the dead. N.T. Wright tells us in commentary *Matthew for Everyone*, "He wasn't really dead, they said. Or maybe the disciples stole the body. Or maybe someone else did. Or perhaps the women went to the wrong tomb. These were all stock answers to

the early Christian message." But Matthew recorded that the women saw exactly where Jesus' body was placed. How did the women's dogged fortitude contradict in advance the claim that they went to the wrong tomb?



Dorothy Sayers, the first woman to earn an Oxford degree and a loyal Christ follower, explained why Jesus won women's loyalty. He was "a prophet and teacher who never nagged at [women]; never flattered or coaxed or patronized... who rebuked without [demeaning] and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them... who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend." How does that illuminate why Summit Church joyously has female and male pastors, staff, and leaders working together?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we're "enlightened," but we still too often hear jokes about women's driving or emotionalism. Guide me to discern and live beyond hurtful gender or other stereotypes, as you did. Amen.

Saturday, December 13 – Read **John 19:25-27** and **Acts 1:9-14**. Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her heart in Luke 2:34-35. This came horribly true as she lovingly, loyally stayed at the cross. And dying on the cross, Jesus was loyal to her. Scholar William Barkley writes in his commentary, "When Jesus saw his mother, he could not but think of the days ahead. He could not commit her to the care of his brothers, for they did not believe in him yet (John 7:5) ...So Jesus committed Mary to John's care and John to Mary's, so that they should comfort each other's loneliness when he was gone. There is something infinitely moving in the fact that Jesus in the agony of the Cross, when the salvation of the world hung in the balance, thought of the loneliness of his mother in the days ahead." And she was not left alone. Acts 1:14 was the last mention of Mary in Scripture. Christian tradition said that at some point after this she and the Apostle John, her protector, moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus. How beautiful that this last mention showed Mary in a circle of disciples committed to prayer!



Some in Jesus' day dodged responsibility for helping parents (especially mothers) by pledging to give their goods to God later. Jesus sternly rebuked that kind of fake piety in Matthew 15:3-9. Even in extreme pain, he "walked his talk" by making sure someone he trusted would care for his mother. How do you think Jesus' return to heaven felt to his mother? How could the promise of his return have comforted her deeply, in ways that went beyond its importance for all his followers? What might Mary, the apostles, Jesus' brothers and the other women have prayed about?



Few of us in our death-denying society want to think about our mortality, and we often put off making a will or other end-of-life provisions. Are you willing to conquer your discomfort to help anyone who depends on you, or might care for you if you become ill? If you haven't already, make plans that will help your family when you are going or gone.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Mary's life journey tested her, and she stayed with you and with your followers. Let her example inspire me to the same kind of determined faithfulness she showed. Amen.