

Pastor Kyle Mercer
Mary's Fear & God's Favor

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Series: Messengers

Luke 1:26-49

BIG IDEA – CHRISTMAS BEGINS WITH GOD COMING TO US

We are not playing church. We are dead serious about the ministry, the mission, and the message of Jesus and getting that message to people who can't come to us because we have to go to them. I mean, isn't that the gospel? That's why we're in the prisons, whether it's Cherry Street Prison here in Winston... We're working on the prison ministry down in Lexington as well.

In fact, here's what happens. Whenever you minister to a prisoner, you don't even know what's going to happen. Two weeks ago, after one of the services, this young couple comes up to me. I'm getting to know them, and I ask them how they got here. It was a married couple. The young lady starts to cry. She says, "I'm here because Two Cities Church has been ministering to my mom who's in prison. My mom has been so impacted that she told my husband and me that we need to go to this church."

By the way, guys, if you're interested in helping with our prison ministry, learning about getting on a serving team, I want you to text the word *prison* to 39808. We have 40-plus people already, and we'll get you connected if you want to begin to invest in the prison system.

You might ask the question, "What in the world are we doing starting with a video from the deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons? What does that have to do with Winston-Salem or Lexington or Davie County?" I'm so excited to tell you this I almost can't stand it. Basically, guys, a wide door for effective ministry has opened up before us.

Josh Smith, who's the deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, is friends with a guy in our church. So, we got connected to Josh, and we said, "Josh, we want to put a

church service, maybe one day a campus, into a federal prison." Well, you may not know this. Why would you? There's one federal prison in North Carolina, Butner Federal Prison. It's where Bernie Madoff was. If you're like, "I'm young. I don't know who Bernie Madoff was," it's where R. Kelly *is*.

We're partnering with an organization called *God Behind Bars*. How strong of a name is *that*. Look to your neighbor and say, "God Behind Bars." Oh, it feels so strong. So, we're talking to God Behind Bars, and they contact... What I'm about to tell you seems too good to be true. They contact the warden. There are 4,000 prisoners here. This is a maximum-security prison.

God Behind Bars contacts the warden and says, "He's actually very excited about Two Cities putting a service in our prison." I know, I know. Which is why I'm glad you're going to be so generous to Hold the Rope. Uh-oh. Guys, it's not easy to get in a federal prison or else everyone would do it. It's not just not easy to put a service in there; it's expensive, because everything that goes in there needs to be approved by the federal prison, every piece of sound, light, and video equipment.

So, as we're talking to God Behind Bars, we're thinking it's going to cost us somewhere between \$150,000 and \$200,000 to put a service in there, but it looks like it's going to happen. In fact, it looks like it's going to happen by Easter. Yeah, it's amazing. So, pretty soon I'm going to say, "Whether you're in Winston, whether you're at our Multiply Campus, whether you're down in Lexington, or whether you're in Butner Prison, welcome to Two Cities Church." Let's pray.

Lord, we are excited. There's a lot to be excited about. We want to climb the biggest hill you will let us climb with as much weight on our back, and we want to glorify you. Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those in prison as if you were in prison." That's not hard for us to do spiritually, Lord, because we remember that you didn't only forgive us, but you've also set us free. We pray for continued favor and continued open doors as we pursue this opportunity by grace and by grit. We pray this and ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

When do you put up your Christmas decorations? Did you just do it right after Thanksgiving or are you biblical, like my family, and did it after Halloween? Guys, here's what's interesting about Christmas: Everybody is in a good mood. Everybody loves Christmas. You might be having a bad day or a bad season, but the only people who don't like Christmas are Scrooge and the Grinch. We've made whole movies about it.

I mean, everybody loves Christmas, but nobody knows in America today what Christmas is about. We have all of these... It's like the Pledge of Allegiance. You've said it so many

times you don't even know what you're saying. My job is to take the familiar and make it fresh. What's interesting is that we live in the most biblically illiterate America in the history of America. In fact, the *New York Times*, in 2013 (that wasn't that long ago), got the resurrection wrong.

Go ahead and "ChatGPT" it if you don't believe me. They got the resurrection wrong. They said it was at the resurrection on Easter that Jesus went to heaven. Think about that. The *New York Times*, one of the most influential newspapers in our nation, got the resurrection wrong. Do you know how many people have to read something in the *New York Times* before it gets to be put in there? There were probably five smart journalists who all read that and said, "Yeah, that's right. Check."

So, what we're doing, if you'll turn to Luke 1, is we're going back to the beginning. We're going to the story of Christmas, and we're viewing it through messengers, because that's another name for angels. Angels are ministers and messengers to God's people. They bring hope, they bring challenge, they bring comfort, and they bring strength.

What we're doing is we're trying to learn the message of Christmas by looking at the first messengers of Christmas, the angels, and who they appear to. So, last week, they appeared to an older couple. This week, they appear to a younger couple. Today, we're going to focus on Mary. Come back next week and we're going to focus on Joseph.

So, pick up with me in Luke 1:26. It says, "***In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth...***" The first thing I want us all to know in a culture confused about Christianity is *Christmas was God's idea*. Everything starts with God. God is the center of everything.

The first thing we're told is that God sent an angel. Did you know that God loves to send people? I mean, if you haven't noticed this, we just got done with the Abraham series. What's Abraham about? God picks a guy and sends him. What's Esther about? God picks a lady and sends her. What's Moses and the burning bush about? God picks a guy and sends him.

The most common thing God does is send people, and maybe we'll talk about that at the end, about where *you* are sent. The second most common thing God does is God sends angels. They don't show up a lot in the Bible. There are a lot in the birth narratives of Jesus. There are a couple of places in the Old Testament. There are a couple more places in the book of Acts. Angels don't show up a lot, but the Bible culminates in God sending forth his Son as his final word in the exact imprint of his nature, as the book of Hebrews says.

So, we're going to talk about sending. Here's what I want you to understand: God is the great initiator. Theologians say God initiates three ways. Just listen to these. It'll make sense to you. God initiates in *creation*, *revelation*, and *salvation*. Think about it. There is nobody in here... There are no exceptions. There are no special cases. Nobody in here asked to be created. The existentialists (a type of philosopher) use the word *thrownness*.

If you just talk about how life feels, if you're really honest, especially in darker moments or especially when something goes wrong or especially if you don't like something, you just feel like, "I was kind of thrown into this world." The most important things about you you didn't even pick. You didn't pick who your parents would be. You didn't pick what your genetics would be. You didn't pick *when* you'd be born. You didn't pick *where* you'd be born.

God created everything. People ask all the time, "Why did God create the world? Was he lonely?" No. God created the world out of abundance. It's like a married couple that goes, "We love each other. We have everything we need. What if we brought more people into the world to share our love and our joy and our stuff with?" That's what God did.

The second way God initiates is *revelation*. I don't know if you've ever thought about God this way. God forfeits his personal privacy. You love your personal privacy, don't you? In fact, here's what you'll know. If somebody is ever trying to get to know you, it'll be way more dependent on *you* than on *them*. They could ask you every question. They could try to observe you and see what you're doing, but at the end of the day, if you don't open up and decide to tell them about you, they're never going to get to know you.

This is why we love the Bible. The Bible is God's revelation. It's not man's book about God; it's God's book given to man about himself. Without revelation, all we have is speculation. If you're new to our church, and you're like, "It's kind of weird. This guy gets on stage, and he talks for, like, 50 minutes about 5 or 10 verses..." It's because of our conviction about the Bible.

The third is *salvation*. None of us prayed and asked God to send the Savior. In fact, the Bible says when you were weak, when you were ungodly, when you were still an enemy, God sent forth his Son. The first thing I want you to see is that God starts Christmas by sending an angel.

Now let's talk about angels for a second. This angel's name is Gabriel. Angels are one of those things... The Bible doesn't give us a lot of information about them, but let's just think about them for, like, five minutes, because we didn't do that last week, and it's kind of interesting.

How many angels' names do we get in the Bible? Two. Gabriel and Michael. They're both men. Are all angels men? I don't know. We don't have any women names. *Gabriel* means "God is my strength." Both Gabriel and Michael show up in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Here's another thing we know about angels: there's a hierarchy. How do I know that? Because Michael is called an *archangel*. There must be some type of authority structure. Then, here's a question people ask every once in a while because they were watching a sitcom or something. They ask, "Do we have guardian angels?" Have you ever thought about if you have an angel?

It's interesting, because the Bible does say, "Some have entertained angels unaware" (Hebrews 12). Jesus says a strange statement. When there are a bunch of adults around, he says to the kids, "These children's angels in heaven always see their faces." *Their* angels? Maybe just kids get angels?

There's a story in Acts where this angel releases Peter from prison, and Peter runs to the house where the disciples are praying and knocks at the door, and it says they thought it was Peter's angel. They thought Peter had an angel? We don't know. There's a mystery to angels, but they show up.

Here, what's interesting is *where* the angel shows up. It says, "In Nazareth of Galilee." Now, there are at least two shocking things about Christmas. The first is the main thing, which we'll probably talk about. We're in a series, so keep coming back. We'll probably get into this more.

The first shocking thing about Christmas is *how* Jesus came. He came as a baby. He came vulnerable. Christmas, probably more than any event, shows a characteristic most religions don't even have a category for for God: the humility of God. We'll probably talk about that in weeks to come. What I want to talk about for a second is *where* he came. It says, "Nazareth of Galilee."

Most of us, unfortunately, have been inoculated with enough Christianity that we're like, "Yeah, I know the story. He also was born in a manger. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Well, here's what I want you to know. Most people thought the Messiah, if he was going to come, would come to Rome. You'd come to the center of culture. You'd come to the center of law. You'd come to the center of politics.

Or if he didn't come to Rome, they thought, "You know where he's going to come. He's definitely going to come to Jerusalem." Because if you're not going to go to the center of law and culture and politics, you're going to at least come to the center of religion and faith.

Part of what God is communicating in sending Jesus to Nazareth is that God cares about every person in every place. Sometimes you show that not by going to the greatest place but by going to the least place. See, here's what's interesting about the God of the Bible.

In other world religions, when God associates himself with people, it says things like, "I am the god of the rich" and "I am the god of the kings" and "I am the god of Pharaoh." Well, why does it say that? Because Pharaoh wrote that. You read the Old Testament, and you're like, "He says, 'I will be a father to the fatherless. I will be a husband to the widow. I am the God of the foreigner and the God of the poor.'"

Today, we're going to see him come to a young lady. Have you ever asked the question, "Who's the first Christian in the New Testament?" Jesus doesn't start his public ministry for 30 years, and even *those* guys are confused all the time. So it's like, "Is it Peter? Is it James? Is it John? Is it Nathanael? Is it Thomas? Who's the first Christian?" Answer? Mary.

Let's look at the story. Verse 27: **"...to a virgin betrothed..."** By the way, betrothal was a serious engagement. You took your vows, but you didn't celebrate or consummate the marriage. You went separate ways to prepare for the marriage. If you broke your betrothal, it was more like a divorce than ending an engagement. That's what betrothal was. **"...to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary."**

Here's the second thing I want you to understand. It's not so much about Christmas but about Christianity. *Christianity is for every generation, but especially young people.* You could argue Jesus Christ was the first youth pastor. I mean, Peter is the only disciple who we know for sure was even married. They were all teens and early 20s at most.

Here's the problem with most Americans, like your classmates and your coworkers. If you've ever invited them to church, this is one of... They think many things, but this is one of the things they think: "Church is for old people." Because most churches are full of old people. You go in there, and you're like, "The median age is 78." Then, everybody watches TV or some goofy movie, and they're like, "All right." It's always an Episcopalian or a Catholic service, and everyone is old.

People are like, "Well, I'm not old." And here's why they think it's for old people. Here's what the average American thinks: "Christianity is about dying and going to heaven." So, if Christianity is about dying and going to heaven... "Well, I'm not planning on dying anytime soon. Maybe when I get closer to dying or somebody I love is close to dying, then we'll go to church, because church and Christianity are about dying and going to heaven."

I thank God that we are such a multigenerational church. You know, one of the things I ask here... I ask the same two questions to everybody. I ask, "Why did you come? How did you get here?" That's always interesting...relationships, friends, social media, or whatever...their old pastor when they moved here from a different part of the city or a different city.

The second question is, "Why did you come back? Why did you come a second time and a third time? Why did you come?" We get a lot of answers, but one of them is all of the young people. Like, "I love all of the young moms. I love all of the young singles. I love all of the young couples. I love how many students there are. I love your college ministry." They're thinking about the next generation.

Now, Mary is unique. It's even hard to talk about it, because it kind of messes with our cultural sensibilities. You know, she's probably like 14. I mean, 18 at most. If it makes you feel more comfortable, we'll just say she's 16. But she's young. Mary is so unique because... You know, I said this a couple of weeks ago. Part of the problem is I was just talking about the miraculous birth of Sarah, so I talked about Mary briefly. We're back in the miraculous birth of Mary now.

Here's what I want you to know. The Catholics elevate Mary too highly, but the average Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, evangelical Protestant church, like us... We don't talk enough about her. Listen. This might make some of you uncomfortable, because it's almost going to sound Catholic, but this is an orthodox doctrinal statement of Christianity: Mary is the mother of God.

Think about it this way. Moms are so important God needed one. Isn't that interesting? I know; it hurts your brain. It *should* hurt your brain. We can't worship a God we could fully figure out. Somehow, God is his father, so Joseph is his stepdad, a blue-collar stepdad who adopts Jesus. Good stepdad, but he's a stepdad. God is his father, and Mary is his mother. It's a great reminder of how important moms are.

Mom is always important. Right? Mom is still important when you're 50 years old, but Mom is uniquely important in the little years. Almost nobody will ever say, "Somebody else mothered me." With the father it is very common, because fathering is something a lot of people can do.

Sometimes he's like, "That coach was like a father to me. That professor was like a father to me. That pastor or that elder was like a father to me." But mothering is so intense. It's so constant. It happens at such a young age. I see it with my kids. All three of my kids absolutely love Margy because of the deep, constant investment she made in the most vulnerable, littlest years of their lives.

Now, here's what's interesting. I started to look at Mary, and I started to do some research. I found out that Mary, throughout church history, has been a model to Christian women. For the rest of this sermon (next week we'll talk to the men), this is particularly for ladies.

Here's what's interesting. Who do women look up to today? Well, since I'm not a woman, I wasn't exactly sure. All I did was ask, "Who are the top 10 women on Instagram who have the most followers?" There are two or three people who are just famous for being famous or, you know, Taylor Swift, or something like that, but the vast majority of those 10 all do the same thing. They all either do fitness, fashion, or beauty. I thought, "Okay. When it comes to social media, those are huge influences."

By the way, why am I talking about social media? Well, listen to this. There was this young lady who was talking to a group of us, and she said, "I started to watch Instagram Reels of tradwives." If you're over 50, you're like, "What is this?" That means traditional wives. I guess what was happening is in these tradwife videos... (A Reel is a short video, if you don't know this. I'm going to bring you kicking and screaming into 2025. Okay?)

This young lady in the church... She's a working mom, and she starts watching these videos. So, she's telling a group of us, "I'm starting to question a lot of things in my life, because I'm watching this mom, and she's at home with the kids, and she's making sourdough bread, or whatever, and their house is perfect." She said, "It's making me question being a working mom."

Now, however you organize your home, I think there's freedom in that, but here's what I found really interesting. I thought, "This is so interesting. What's making her question her identity as a mom was not a sermon I preached, was not a personal Bible study, but a 45-second Reel." I think that's happening to all of us way more than we realize.

So then I started looking. I thought, "What are the biggest podcasts women listen to?" Number one is true crime stories. No wonder you women are always scared. "I don't know. I just watched 14 hours of a guy who killed his wife and buried her in the backyard." That's actually true. Those are the number one.

Then I looked at the top three women-to-women podcasts. Number one: *Call Her Daddy*. Some of you women are like, "I don't know what you're talking about." Sure. This girl is so famous she interviewed Kamala Harris right before the election. With each of these, I'm thinking in my mind, "Who is this person?" She's the cool sorority girl you weren't able to be friends with earlier. That's who she is.

I mean, her episodes, I couldn't even... I would not have a job anymore if I read the titles of her podcasts. Some of the easier ones to say are things like, "How to make men afraid of you," "How to break up," and all this. It's all relationship advice. So, that's her.

The second most listened to podcast is a lady I'd never heard of, Mel Robbins. She's the archetypical cool aunt. She even has those uncool glasses. Do you know what I'm talking about? When people wear those, what they're saying is "I'm so cool my coolness overcomes the uncoolness of these glasses." If you've ever wondered, "Why are they wearing uncool glasses?" it's because they think their coolness overcomes the uncoolness of their glasses.

So, she's the cool aunt. She's the "Honey, let me tell you how life really works." She's the TED Talk lady. The third one is *We Can Do Hard Things*. It's kind of the boss babe. It's the two ladies talking about work, life, feminism, societal pressures, and mental health issues. I've not even... I'm more familiar with the *Call Her Daddy* podcast. The other two, I don't know whether they're good or bad. But I was like, "Where are all of the moms? Where's the older advice?"

Let me just encourage you. In our church, there are so many older ladies or ladies older than you. You can meet them in Community Group, and you can meet them on a serving team. Honestly, guys, sometimes we look up to people who absolutely hate everything we believe. We're watching their filtered, one-dimensional life when there's a real woman in this church who could invest in you.

Another way you can meet an older lady in this church who could invest in you... This is going to be a brand-new idea for some of you. It would be to come a few minutes early to church. You'll probably find a parking spot a little bit easier. You'll probably check your kids in a little bit easier. Or (this is another idea) if you stay a few minutes after church. Just be normal and relational and just ask questions. You'll start to feel very connected to people.

Now, let me tell you one other thing about this. We only really get one word to describe Mary. Let's read it. The word is used twice. Verse 27: "**...to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.**" You weren't expecting this. You're like, "It's a Christmas series, and Kyle is talking about virginity."

Virginity is one of those topics today where... Remember the movie *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*? Was that a movie honoring virginity or making fun of a guy for being 40 and still being a virgin? What percentage of brides walk to the altar today and say they're still a

virgin? Five percent. I think it's lower than that because they lie. It's probably lower than that.

Now, the hard thing about virginity is, in our culture today, after the sexual revolution, the view is "You have to have sex if you're going to be complete in this life," which we know is not true since Jesus Christ was a fully human person and never had sex.

Today, if you're a guy, and you're in your late 20s and still a virgin, people are like, "Are you an incel?" Basically, involuntarily celibate. "Are you that repulsive and unattractive that you could make it through three decades of your life and still be a virgin?" To women, it's "If you haven't, then you're a prude, you're religious, you're uptight, and maybe you're not attractive."

Why is the virgin birth so important? First, it's important theologically, because when Jesus Christ came into the world, a new person didn't need to be created; Jesus Christ needed to be born. A new person didn't need to be created, because Jesus Christ is eternal, but Jesus Christ had to be born.

The second is God wanted to show the miraculous nature of salvation, that it was going to ultimately be from him and would have nothing to do... That's what I talked about earlier. God ultimately initiates salvation.

So, what's interesting about Mary... She is a model to single women because she is in a very serious relationship with a guy, and she's still a virgin. Now, from this moment, imagine she's 15 or 16 years old. This angel appears to her. Then look at what the angel says in verse 28.

"...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!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'"

Okay. Here's what we're going to talk about, particularly with women. Men struggle with this too, but we're talking about Mary. We'll talk about Joseph and men next week. The first thing Mary had to deal with was fear and anxiety in her life. Now, we know this. This is not a guess. Men and women are equal in value, dignity, significance, and worth, equally created in the image of God.

Women uniquely struggle with anxiety. Men uniquely struggle with alcohol and antisocial behavior. We maybe have more problems than women do, but women uniquely struggle with anxiety. You think about it, and you go, "Why are women more anxious than men?"

Well, one reason is women take on all of the problems of all of the people they love in their life. You know, a guy can go golfing with three of his friends, and all three of their lives are falling apart. He gets in the car and goes, "Where am I going to eat?" He doesn't even think about it. There are some problems with us men. We're like waffles. Women are like spaghetti. We just move on. Women usually take on all of the problems of their friends.

The second reason women are unbelievably anxious is they're watching all of these true crime documentaries. No. The second reason women are uniquely anxious is the world is a more dangerous place for women. We live in such a protected time now where we have the police and government. Just imagine life without any of that.

The fact that some single girl can walk her Golden Retriever downtown and not worry about it is an achievement of civilization. Not normal in most places for all of human history. Sex particularly is way more dangerous for women. The whole, "Oh, yeah, safe sex..." Sex isn't safe. It's not safe because of disease. It's not safe because of pregnancy. It's not safe because of anything.

Here's what else is interesting. Women uniquely become anxious when they become moms. That makes sense. It just happens that the people they love the most in their entire life, the people most connected to them, are also the most vulnerable people they know. In our church, we'll have women who otherwise haven't really struggled with anxiety. Then they have a kid, and they don't check their kid into our kids' ministry for three years. You're like, "What's going on?"

See, fear will literally freeze you, and if you let it, it'll let you retreat. This is what happens. If you don't make some courageous decisions, basically, what happens is the world gets bigger and you get smaller. It's not a good thing. By the way, this is a great hack to know.

Here's what happens when you're afraid. We'll go to guys for a second. Say there's a guy in here... In a room this size, there has to be. Say there's a guy in here who has noticed a girl in here. He's a single guy. He has noticed this cute girl. Now that I said it, he's thinking about her right now. He sees her, and he's thinking, "Okay. Maybe I should try to ask her out after church today."

As soon as he has that thought to himself, he feels the fear. Well, here's the great hack to know in life: you feel the exact same amount of fear whether you do something or don't do something. If you're afraid to confess your sin to somebody, you feel the same fear whether you do it or don't. If you're afraid to ask your boss for a raise, you'll feel the exact same fear whether you do it or whether you don't.

Look at the angel's cure for fear. Verse 30: **"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, [for everything is going to be okay].'"** That's not what he says. Look at what he says. **"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'"**

We want God to say, "Don't be afraid; you're not going to get disabled. Don't get afraid; your spouse isn't going to die at a young age. Don't get afraid; you're not going to get some horrible cancer." It says, actually, what drives out fear is the favor of God, or the way we say it is the *grace* of God.

But you have to really believe it. You have to be like, "Okay. I don't know what is ahead of me health-wise, but the grace of God will meet me in it. God will use it, and if I have a long enough view, God will raise my body from the dead. If somebody I love who's in the Lord dies, I'm one day going to be reconciled with them." We have to believe these things.

I heard a pastor say one time (this wasn't in our church) this teenage girl came up to him and said, "I know Jesus loves me. I know he died for my sins. I know I'm going to heaven, but what does that matter if no boys like me?" Sadly, that's where so many of us are. We have these ideas about God, but they haven't dropped down deep enough to actually change us.

Mary first deals with fear. Next she deals with doubt. Let me show you this. Verse 31: **"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the 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."**

In other words, the angel finally says to Mary, "You're going to give birth to and raise God." Now, how many of you here go, "I'm not ready to raise God"? That's how *I* feel. So, she's overwhelmed. Look at what happens. **"And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'"**

So, first she deals with fear. Now she deals with doubt. There's nothing wrong with doubt. We all have doubts. In fact, if you've never doubted your faith, I doubt that you believe your faith. By the way, when you have big doubts in your life, sometimes what you have to do (we can do it together right now) is you just have to create a box in your mind and heart called *mystery*.

You know, it's interesting. They say one of the things that keeps Christians humble is mystery. What keeps you not becoming an ideology and a cult... Like, if I got up here and was like, "I know why everything happened to you. Come here. I have the specific answer

to all of the difficult, complex questions in your life," well, then I think *I'm* God. There's just a mystery to it.

Here's the thing with doubt. There are three types of doubt, according to this professor at Liberty. He says there is *factual doubt*, first of all. *Factual doubt* is what people tell you they're dealing with. "Well, I just have questions about seven-day literal creation, creation and evolution, resurrection, the validity of the Bible," or whatever it is. From what we can tell, only about 15 percent of people really have factual or philosophical doubt.

Here's how you know that's not the real issue for people. You can say this to them: "If I could answer all of your questions, would you believe?" The most honest and best part of them usually will say, "No." So then you go, "Oh, we're not dealing with factual doubt; we're dealing with emotional doubt." *Emotional doubt* is "I have a lot of personal struggles because of the experiences in my life."

Some of you may go, "Something happened to me when I was a child or happened to me in college, and I've maybe never even told anybody, but I've always wondered how something like that could happen to me and God be a good God." Or "My dad died when I was 5 years old, and I've always wondered why God would take my dad at such..." And that's real. But you have to know... Are we dealing with factual doubt or are we dealing with emotional doubt?

The kind of doubt the Bible is against is *willful doubt*. It was the doubt of the Pharisees. It's the doubt of a closed heart versus an open heart. A closed heart doubting is looking for reasons *not* to believe. An open heart doubting is looking for reasons *to* believe. It's my favorite prayer in the Bible, probably. "I believe; help my unbelief." Do you know who prayed that? A dad with a struggling son.

She struggles first with fear, she struggles with doubt, and she's about to potentially struggle with loneliness. Let me show you this. You start feeling all alone. Verse 35: "***And 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...'***" By the way, all three members of the Trinity are in this one verse.

"...will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son..." "She has had kind of a dramatic experience like you have." ***"...and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."***

And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' ***And the angel departed from her. In those days Mary arose and went with haste***

into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth."

She knew she needed community. Do you know Americans today are so lonely? I looked up what percentage of each generation in America says they're lonely. Here's the takeaway: the younger you are, the lonelier you are. Like, the other day, I was at the grocery store, and there were these two people in front of me.

The first person... I had never seen this before. Maybe you've seen this. I'm in the grocery store. The person in front of me is buying a few items, and then they take their phone out, and I can tell they're scanning a DoorDash card. I just looked at them. I thought, "Oh, that's how this works. You come here and do grocery shopping, and DoorDash pays for this, and you take it." I thought, "That's interesting."

The next person, a different person, a different DoorDash card. I thought, "This is the America we live in. People live by themselves while they feel connected through a screen, and then they order their food on DoorDash." What percentage of American adults live all by themselves? Twenty-nine percent. Almost one in three American adults who you'll meet live all by themselves.

It's not a sin to live by yourself, but the Bible does say in general, "It's not good for a man to be alone." It's interesting, because I thought about my own life. Maybe this is a generational thing. I never lived alone...ever. I grew up in a family, then I went to college and had roommates, and I always had roommates. Then I went and rented a house and had housemates and then got married. I've never lived alone. A third of Americans are living all by themselves.

So, Mary goes to Elizabeth. This is what I want us to focus on, what Elizabeth does. Verse 40: ***"...and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary..."*** And people wonder why Christians are pro-life. ***"...the baby..."*** The personhood of the unborn. ***"...the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit..."***

When you're lonely or struggling with fear or struggling with doubt, you don't just need Christians; you need Spirit-filled Christians. There's a difference. I mean, a lot of you in here are genuinely born again. You love the Lord, you read your Bible, you go to church, and you do more good things than bad things, but if you could diagnose yourself, you would say, "I'm not really a Spirit-filled person."

A Spirit-filled person has a vibrant, daily relationship with God that believes, "God is still at work. God would like to do something." Well, that's who she goes to. Yes, a relative,

but more importantly, a Spirit-filled relative. Look here. ***"...and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'"***

You have to ask, "How does Elizabeth know Mary is pregnant?" *Mary* just found out Mary is pregnant. Mary is not showing, but she knows. She knows because the Holy Spirit told her. ***"And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord..."*** How does she know it's the Messiah she's pregnant with? Because the Holy Spirit told her.

"...should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed..." She gives her a word of encouragement. ***"...is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."***

Mary needs something that everybody in here needs but few people get. It's something that I don't know I've ever addressed before in a sermon. She needs a Spirit-filled, personal word from a Christian she knows and loves. Guys, we have enough preaching in this church. You're going to come, and one of us is going to get up here. We're going to yell at you for 45 or 50 minutes. You can go find preaching anywhere. Go find your podcast or listen to YouTube. Preaching is everywhere.

Guys, we have enough music. I mean, Donovan and his team are incredible. We're going to sing, and then you go find out what songs we sing and download your Spotify playlist. We got it. Guys, we have enough relationships. I'm really glad. I mean, some of you need to get in Community Groups and stuff, but in general, we're in groups. What we're missing are personal, Spirit-filled words to one another.

I heard a guy tell a story. This was another pastor. He said he got invited to speak at a men's event. When he got to speak at the men's event, he gathered the elders of his church and said, "Guys, I'm going to speak at this event. Will you pray with me about it?" And they're praying for this event he's going to go speak at at a different church.

After they're done praying, one of the elders says, "I have a word for a man who's going to be at that event." The guy tells the story. He thinks... It's probably how *I'd* think. "Well, do *you* want to give it to him? I'm the one who has to get on a plane and go fly somewhere, and I'm the guest speaker."

He says, "Here's the word. There will be a man there from Europe, and he feels as though God has forsaken him. You need to encourage him and tell him God sees him and has not forsaken him in all his trouble." So, he gets on the plane, and he goes to this men's event. You know, I've done this kind of stuff before. It's kind of nerve-racking. You don't know them. They don't know you. You know, you do your pleasantries. You honor the pastor. You thank everybody.

He says, "Guys, we were praying for this event, and one of my elders has a word from God for one of you. One of you is from Europe, and you feel as though God has forsaken you. I want to let you know God has not forsaken you. God is with you." He said he was all nervous to say that, and then all of a sudden, one guy stood up.

The guy said, "Well, we were just trying to do foster and adoption care, and my wife and my whole family were really excited about it. Basically, my job made me move to America. Because of all this, this yearslong foster care/adoption thing completely broke apart. I've been trying to lead my family through it, but we're all so discouraged, we thought about leaving the faith."

He said, "A guy invited me to this men's night, and I didn't even want to come here, and now you've given me this personal word to encourage me." I know, for some of us, that's going to mess with our theology, but let me just tell you, there are people in this church who need you to know your Bible, observe their life, and love them enough to say something.

See, Christmas is all about messengers. Don't get overwhelmed by angels appearing as messengers. That's unique in history. That's unique in the Bible. The truth is somebody came to *you* as a messenger with the message of the gospel. You may have called her "Mom." You may have called him "Dad." It might have been a pastor. It might have been a friend. It might have been a classmate. It might have been a coworker.

Let me tell you, there are people in this church all around us who are experiencing loneliness. They are experiencing fear. They are experiencing doubt. You might be the person to bring a personal word to them. Do you know what it says about temptation? "No temptation has seized you but what is common to man." Then what does it say? "God will provide an escape." What if *you're* the escape? What if *you're* the way out? What if something that you need to say before the end of the year can help set another person free? Let's pray about that together.

Lord, what an opportunity to be made in your image, and part of what that means is we are the speaking creature. We have the ability to bring hope and healing with our words, Lord. Some of us right now need to repent because we have a critical spirit.

Some of you in here need to repent. You have a critical spirit. The glass is always half full with you. You have the spiritual gift of always finding something wrong. I want you to pray right now, "Lord, help me catch the people in my life doing something good."

Lord, I pray right now for all of us that you would fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we wouldn't just be Christians but we would be Spirit-filled Christians, that in some way, because first we know you and we know the Bible and we love people, you would give us

unique insights into people's lives and unique words to speak to them so that we and the people around us can do what Mary did. It's not after the angel appearance but after the personal word that she finally sings the song.

Lord, would you set us free to give people personal words, Spirit-filled words, that they may more deeply worship you and be more grateful for all you've done. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.