

Her Troubled Visitation

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[0 : 00] So, for the next number of weeks leading up to the Sunday before Christmas Day, we're going to look at the early chapters in Luke's gospel as we think about the birth of Jesus.

It's going to get the birth of Jesus anytime, but it's a great time of the year to do that. And we're going to do it this time through the lens of Mary, Jesus' mother. And I think that's going to be exciting.

And challenging and helpful for us in our Christian lives. And if you're not a Christian, I hope it will really make you think about the gospel and about Jesus Christ, the good news of the gospel. But I think when you read, we didn't read the whole chapter, but when you read the section that we read this morning that Sue read for us, I think there's at least to the modern person, there's at least a couple of challenges that you may have thought about or you may have considered, maybe not, but if you've read a passage like this, it may be that some thoughts and some challenges have entered into your mind.

I've thought of at least a couple, the first being Mary herself, because she was a nobody, right? Mary was really a nobody.

[1 : 21] Maybe we've known about Mary if it hadn't been for this gospel account and for what happened. She was in Galilee, in a backwater in Palestine.

As far as we're aware, she had no formal education. She was a peasant. Nothing that would make her stand out among the roughly, and any scientists and other kind of people might question this, 100 billion people who have walked on this planet since its creation.

Yet probably she's the most famous person who ever lived, other than her son. She certainly, I would argue, she's certainly the most famous woman who ever lived.

This absolute apparent nobody. So Mary herself is a bit of a contradiction in all of that, in the significance and the importance of Mary. But also, the fact that this, the reality that this story is written, and the passage that we read together, is written as fact and not as fiction.

It's not fable. It's not make-believe. It's written as fact. It's written by Dr. Luke, the famous gospel writer who was also a physician, who was a medical doctor, as we're recorded in Colossians chapter 4.

[2 : 49] And like all medical people, precision matters. It matters the kind of diagnosis that you give to people. It matters the medicine that you give. Accuracy is important for a doctor.

And here is someone who is giving an orderly account, we didn't read it, but in the first paragraph we're told that as he's explaining why he's written the gospel, he's written it to a friend of his, theophilus, who may be interested in knowing about Jesus.

He says he's gathered all these eyewitnesses together, and he's come to make an orderly account for you, most excellent theophilus, that you may have certainty about the things that you've been taught.

So it's given clearly as a factual account of Jesus. Now, medics do keep accurate records. My sister Nanny, who's here today, she's worked for quite a while on the genealogy of our family, and a couple of weeks ago sent us through as siblings, this phenomenal digital record of my dad's war record.

51 pages of great and detailed information about his war record, and it's fascinating because it also includes his medical records of the time, and these medical records are detailed and they're accurate, and it mattered.

[4 : 11] He was an ordinary soldier, and when you think of 51 pages that have been digitalized, of one soldier, how much work has been done over the years to record for posterity, all of the details that mattered.

On the 11th of December, 1944, complaints of a left frontal headache that lasted two months, injured in action in Normandy, evacuated to the UK on the 30th of July, 1944.

Accurate, detailed knowledge of his medical condition because that's what doctors do, that's what medics do, and that is the case with Dr. Luke.

That's exactly what he's doing. And here we have an account factually given of God, of angels, of miracles, of a divine plan, all being given to Mary in one recorded conversation, to Mary, these amazing realities.

And that's a great challenge. I would imagine that's a great challenge to us this morning in our secular and naturalistic mindset and philosophical thinking when all these things are recorded as facts.

[5 : 25] That everything here is being explained with a purpose and a determination and an existence that's very different from our day-to-day experience.

But I think it's very important for us to consider that and to be reminded of that as believers, unless we sink into a life of ordinariness and faithlessness and secularity and materialism which denies all these realities which are so significant for us in our life of faith.

So we're reminded here of several things in this account that was read this morning. We're reminded of the reality of Gabriel who is an angel and he comes as a messenger of God to speak directly to Mary.

So we have that kind of rather unspoken or un-dramatic description of almost just ordinary that, well, an angel came, Gabriel came and spoke to her.

He comes from another realm, a heavenly realm, and he's sent. He's sent by God and he breaks into human experience and to human reality and to human life, representing one of a myriad of powerful beings, created beings that are not human, that we can't see but that are very real, glorious, powerful servants of God.

[7 : 03] Gabriel who is mentioned in the Old Testament in Daniel as coming to bring God's message which then was also prophetically speaking about Jesus in the midst of the Old Testament.

And so there's this almost unspoken expectation that there is an unseen world, a world that we don't interact with from day to day, that is all around us, an unseen world but that is a spiritual reality that has a huge impact on created experience and on our experiences even if we don't know it. And the Bible speaks very clearly and very openly about angels and demons, about heaven and hell, about God and the devil, about good and evil.

And these are absolute clear factual realities that are revealed to us in Scripture. But we also recognize it's not like ying and yang, it's not like these things are equal and opposite and kind of wrestling and battling with one another.

They're not equal forces and the Bible makes that clear. The Bible makes clear from the very beginning that God is the author, God is the Savior, God is the Redeemer, God is the Creator, God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, nothing else is.

[8 : 22] And in the mystery and the reality of darkness and the evil and of blackness that He has come to defeat that and He has done it through this amazing reality that we are introduced to today.

So the Bible absolutely and clearly speaks into origins, speaks into morality, does speak into the problem of evil and the purposes of God, the genesis, the focus and the victory of good over evil, which ultimately we will all experience when Christ returns and in the new heavens and the new earth, if we are put our trust in Jesus.

And what we see is not only the reality of angels, but we see in this passage very clearly God getting close and intimate. God the sovereign, God the eternal, God the ineffable, God who in many ways we feel cannot be known by us, gets close and intimate.

Now God all the time is accused of being distant, isn't he, by so many and maybe sometimes by ourselves in our own lives, the divine clockmaker or the distant potentate or the angry deity, the unknowable one, the one who doesn't care about my life or my involvement or my concerns and we can often feel that.

Now there are many questions that we have about God, of course, as much we don't understand, but here is God, here is God and He hones in on Mary individually.

[10 : 03] Anyway sometimes see these clips of films, film of, I don't know how they work, a camera that's out in space and you see space and then you see the planet earth and then it's homing in all the time and it hones in and it hones in on a land mass and it hones in further and it's Europe and it

hones in further and it's the UK and it hones in further and it's Scotland and it's Edinburgh and then it's the lawn market and then it's the red doors of St. Columbus.

You know, you see that amazing zooming in from the massive into the very detail and it's kind of like that here with Mary, you've got this divine being the living God and He's honing in on one individual, on Mary and on Elizabeth, also her cousin and He speaks into her life and He brings her comfort in her fears when she is met with Gabriel.

I'll say a little bit about that in a minute, it's interesting that there's no indication of what Mary thinks of Gabriel in terms of, does she know he's an angel?

I think there's something pretty amazing about him because she's certainly full of fear and he says to her, don't be afraid, God is with you, you've found favour from God and He comforts her and brings her into His loving purposes.

This is Mary and she's chosen and she's chosen by God and He explains and I think it has to be one of the most incredible verses in the whole of the Bible, in verse 35, the angel said to the Holy Spirit, we'll come upon you, the power of the Most High, that would be God the Father, will overshadow you, therefore a child, Jesus Christ the Son, will be born, He will be called Holy, the Son of God.

[12:05] It truly is an outstanding and remarkable verse that we have here where God explains to her that miraculously, the Trinitarian one explains that the Son will be born of her miraculously flesh of her flesh.

The Trion Mysterious God is focused on and intimately involved in this woman's life, in this miraculous conception of Jesus, God the Son coming into this world.

It's clearly impossible to us, it's outrageous, but it's unmistakably unique in the history of the world. It had to be. God broke into human society. He came because it was His own will, not the will of a Father, not the will of a couple together, but the will of God who came and He was brought into this world specifically, seamlessly to be our redeemer as flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones.

And so we have the beginning, many ways, of this outstanding revelation of His love and of His justice that is going to make sense to this broken world and to every single cry of belonging that you have and cry for mercy and cry for justice and cry for purpose and hope.

[13:41] And we find it, we might even ever have to go in a sense further than that one verse because it unpacks what lies ahead and it makes clear what Jesus had come to do.

And not only does God get close and intimate, but He takes His unshakable plan for humanity out of the shadows in these great verses of 32 and 33 when He's explaining who will be born to her. He will be great. He 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. So Jesus is breaking, God is breaking in through Gabriel giving this message which He'd given to Daniel before and which the angels knew about at that level, although I do believe there was clear surprise when that will of God was unpacked, particularly in the rejection and crucifixion and death of Jesus.

But here the certainty of God's plan, the clear action, this long expected Old Testament prophecy of the coming Messiah of the Redeemer, the Son of David who would reign on His throne forever was being made clear, a purpose that was there from before the creation of the world and that reality of Ephesians chapter, what have I done with that bit of paper?

[15:23] Oh, here it is, Ephesians 4 which encapsulates what the angel is saying or God is saying through the angel, for He chose us and includes us in this moment.

He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with His pleasure and will to the praise of His glorious grace which He's given freely to us in the one He loves.

He chose us in Him before the creation of the world which is the unpacking of what is happening here, that it's crystal clear.

We need to remember and remind ourselves of that fact. It's clear, crystal clear. God taken on flesh, the incarnation, the life, the death, the resurrection provides for us the central understanding of and meaning of the universe.

And that's important for us today. It's important for us as Christians today because it starts in contradiction, in stark contradiction to the concept of a history that is unfolding randomly where the future is unknown, where purpose and meaning is undefinable if there can be any purpose or

meaning at all.

[16:50] We stand against that, and we stand against that personally, and we stand against it in terms of the way forward of the world as well, corporately.

But we recognize that our lives and our futures are in God's hands. So God takes His unmistakable plan. God gets close and intimate, and Gabriel comes.

This is all revealed to Mary. All revealed to Mary. It's great, isn't it? You couldn't make it up. Of the hundred billion people who have ever lived, this financially poor teenage girl without formal education, but she was undoubtedly well taught and intelligent, planning a quiet life with Joseph to whom she was betrothed as a tradesman in a Galilean village.

This revealed to her, to a woman, to an uneducated woman. What a glorious upturn of how it so often is in the world in which we live.

What a great message to all of the world's great misogynists and all the men who think that they are more important than women. That here is Jesus, their coming of Jesus, this most significant of announcements that was ever made, and this most incredible union of God with human flesh being spoken of and dealt with to a woman.

[18:27] But more significantly, you may think today that God isn't interested in you, and in your life, and that you can't grab His attention, and He doesn't care about what's happening in your experience.

That couldn't be further from the truth. If you're a believer today, it can't be further from the truth. You need to keep in mind what has already happened, how He has already shown Himself to be deeply interested, deeply concerned, deeply involved in your life, deeply loving you.

If you're not a believer, there's that great invitation to recognize and know that His arms are open to invite you to a personal relationship with Him. It was all revealed to Mary, and we'll just finish with a couple of thoughts about Mary.

She's one who was gifted, Grace. We're told in verse 28, these amazing words, and He came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.

Favoured one doesn't mean that God looked down and so she's a lot better than everybody else.

She's the best looking, best person inside and out to be the mother of my son.

[19:42] But it rather means that she was endowed with Grace. Grace was poured out on her, and she recognized that herself in her amazing song, which we'll talk about briefly.

She says in verse 50, and His mercy is for those who fear Him, from generation to generation. She knew she was a recipient of God's mercy. She knew that she had come to Him and that she depended on His mercy.

She'd been chosen by God and recognized her need of forgiveness. And that is the foundation, foundation reality for every single human being, isn't it?

That we recognize our need of His mercy and we recognize that He will never turn away anyone who calls out to Him in faith, that He invites us to come and receive His salvation.

She was gifted, Grace. It's the gift that we're believers we have, gifted through nothing in ourselves other than that recognition of our need of it. And we come to Him.

[20:42] But we also see that she was acutely afraid. In verses 29 and 30, when she saw the angel, she was greatly troubled at the sayings and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said, do not be afraid, Mary. You've found favor with God. So as we don't really know what the angel looked like, did he appear as an angelic being?

Was that why she was afraid? Did he have a great sense of power about him? Or was it the message that he brought? Or how did she know it was from God? We don't know these things. But she was definitely afraid.

She was being confronted with unseen realities and divine truth that for her was not initially comfortable, just as it can often not be very comfortable for us to be confronted with the truths of God's Word or the truth of the claims of Jesus Christ.

And even the comforting words of God sometimes can be overlooked because we recognize that in Christ we're heading into unknown territory. If you're standing, sitting on the edge of commitment to Jesus Christ, there's a lot of fear there.

[21:49] A lot of fear of going into what you think might be unknown. What's it going to be for me to be a Christian? What am I going to have to give up? What am I going to be? What am I going to

have to say? What will it mean for my reputation? What will it mean for my standing? There can be lots of different fears that we have because we move forward by faith and we move into unknown territory.

But the reality is there that God intervening in our lives will always turn our world upside down. And the door of our hearts will always be a challenge to us because it will take us out of our comfort zone as we go and follow Him.

But He knows that. He knows that. And He says to Mary, as He says to us, He said, look, don't be afraid. So often He says that in Scripture, doesn't He? He understands us and He calms our fears. And He says, I will be with you. Gabriel promised that the Lord will be with you and the Lord will be with you. And if the Lord is with us, then that's the most important thing.

Whatever else is our battles and our struggles and difficulties, if we know that this living, infinite Creator God is with us, then that is what matters. And He promises to do that.

[22 : 57] So she was afraid and God knew that and comforted her fears and does with us also. And she also asked a reasonable question. In verse 34, it was an extremely reasonable question when He says what was going to happen.

She says, and Mary said to the angel, how will this be since I am a virgin? She's not daft. Now a lot of people despise the whole concept of the virgin birth and say it's just mythological.

And anyway, virgin here in the original language doesn't necessarily mean someone who has never had sex before, but it can mean just a young woman. But it doesn't make sense, does it?

How will this be since I'm a young woman? Well, that wouldn't make sense, that question. It wouldn't be a reasonable question because she's a young woman and young woman can have children.

She knows exactly what she is saying here and Luke knows exactly the questions that she knows her own body. She knows about her relationship with Joseph to whom she was betrothed and betrothed an ancient nearest, was akin to marriage.

[23 : 59] It was more than just what we call an engagement. Really which is why it says that Joseph would have needed to have got a certificate of divorce for her, but nonetheless they still lived apart until their wedding day.

They lived in their family homes and there was no intimate relations until they get married and she knew that. And she knew that that was the case and that she wasn't playing around or playing the field.

And so she asked a reasonable question and she was given this answer from God that this will happen because of the claim that Gabriel made.

She was given the additional information of her old and barren cousin Elizabeth, being six months pregnant. She's given the truth of the Old Testament prophecies and it is topped by the angel saying with God all things are possible.

Nothing is impossible with God. It's great, isn't it? We get these answers to Mary's questions here and God isn't afraid of our questions.

[25 : 13] God doesn't want to keep our questions to ourselves. You know, he's the sovereign king of the universe. He can cope with them. Oh, we may have some great questions. That's going to stump God.

It's not. We may not find the answer and we may not find the answer easy, but we're not to be afraid of going to Him with rational and real and genuine questions.

And it's important when we do to search the scriptures, to search what He has revealed about Himself and to find what He is saying. I think often we ask the questions, but we're actually afraid of the answers.

But faith enables us to come to recognize the answers are always good from God. We might not be easy. We might not understand everything that He reveals, but they are good.

He is the God who has revealed to us what we need to know. He is a God who understands our fears. He's the God of promise. And also, let us not forget this morning, He is the God of the impossible.

[26 : 19] This was impossible, a child being born of a virgin. It was God's will for it to be done. She asked her reasonable question. And lastly, very briefly, she sung a song of praise.

One of the greatest songs that has ever been written, the Magnificat, and we have it in these verses from verse 46. I wish you had more time to look at this amazing song of praise.

Mary, this unnoticed young woman, probably a teenager, becomes one of the authors of Scripture, one of the authors of the greatest parts of Scripture, one of the greatest songs of praise ever spoken.

And we really don't have time to look at it, but it's definitely worth a second look. It's framed in Old Testament language. It's framed in the hymnology of the Old Testament, the way that it's written. She clearly knows a lot of truth about the Old Testament and even about the way songs were structured in the hymnology. It closely mirrors the song of Hannah in the Old Testament in similar situations, as it were.

[27 : 29] And it is intensely personal. My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for He's looked on the humblest state of His servant.

And from now on, all generations will call me blessed. It's inspired. It's revelatory. It's powerful. And it's personal. And what an amazing song for her to be given and to be able to create when we know her future, faced with the region, shortly faced with the region as an unmarried, pregnant teenager. Suspicion, poverty, homelessness, sorrow, loss, unspeakable heartache. A difficult life predicted by Old Simeon that we'll look at again in a few weeks where the sword will pierce your soul also.

But God was her Savior. God was her redeemer. God was the focus of her love, and she was the focus of His. And her life had purpose and hope, and He was with her.

And that is why she was able to find genuine satisfaction. She realized the counterintuitive nature of faith, which is that God sends the rich empty away, and it is the poor that He helps.

[28 : 55] And that's not necessarily in any way physical wealth that is being spoken of here, but that great reality of spiritual poverty being honored by God and spiritual wealth are not needing the spiritual wealth of God, but recognizing that we are rich and morally good and independent and don't need God, going away from God empty.

It's the song of the revolution. That's what it is. It's a song of the revolution. It's a revolutionary song because it turns every natural instinct of our lives upside down and it speaks of trusting in the priorities and the expectations and the realities of a God who was conceived in the womb of Mary and who became flesh.

And who learned obedience and who lived perfectly the life that we couldn't live and died the death that we deserved. It's utterly, radically revolutionary.

And we're called to put our faith in Jesus Christ, this child who became the redeemer. And I hope and I pray that it's your song.

The song is really important because singing so often is an expression of our hearts. I do hope it's your song. Let's pray. Father God, I pray and ask that we would take these words of the song and recognize that Mary becomes in many ways representative of every believer, every mature believer who comes to recognize the personal, loving, concerned and amazingly wonderful gift of Jesus Christ to us in salvation.

[30 : 57] And it's the most precious thing in the world. And we might be the poorest, meanest, least gifted person that has ever been created.

But in Christ we are the richest, we are the most privileged, we are the most honored, and that we have had the most attention lavished on us that we could ever hope for.

And not only now, but unspeakably, unimaginably so in the future. Help us to grasp hold of that, the significance and the importance and the reality of this living truth that's revealed to us, which we all know so well here, most of us anyway, I'm sure, and which might just slip out of our mind and our attention as just another sermon that's been ticked off and another Bible passage that we know about anyway.

But may it be, Lord Jesus, that your Spirit takes it today, refreshes, revives, renews, reinvigorates, redeems and transforms us as we enter into this new week, this privileged new week, a week that we'll never have again and a week that you gift to us.

In Jesus' name, amen.