

**Dark Christmas**  
**"The Darkness of Disrepute"**  
**Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25**

**Introduction**

- Who is Christmas for? I was reading a blog this week by [Matt Redmond](#). He writes this. He's right on. "We have it sunk deep into our collective cultural consciousness that Christmas is for the happy people. You know, those with idyllic family situations enjoyed around stocking-strewn hearth dreams. Christmas is for healthy people who laugh easily and at all the right times, right? The successful and the beautiful, who live in suburban bliss, can easily enjoy the holidays...We live and act as if this is who should be enjoying Christmas.
- But this is backwards. Christmas—the great story of the incarnation of the Rescuer—is for everyone, especially those who need a rescue. Jesus came for those who look in the mirror and see ugliness. Jesus came for daughters whose fathers never told them they were beautiful.
- Christmas is for those whose lives have been wrecked by cancer, and the thought of another Christmas seems like an impossible dream. Christmas is for those who would be nothing but lonely if not for social media. Christmas is for those whose marriages have careened against the retaining wall and are threatening to flip over the edge. Christmas is for the son whose father keeps giving him hunting gear when he wants art materials. Christmas is for smokers who cannot quit even in the face of a death sentence.
- Christmas is for prostitutes, adulterers, and porn stars who long for love in every wrong place. Christmas is for college students who are sitting in the midst of the family and already cannot wait to get out for another drink. Christmas is for those who traffic in failed dreams. Christmas is for those who have squandered the family name and fortune—they want "home" but cannot imagine a gracious reception. Christmas is for parents watching their children's marriage fall into disarray.
- Christmas is really about the gospel of grace for sinners. Because of all that Christ has done on the cross, the manger becomes the most hopeful place in a universe darkened with hopelessness. In the irony of all ironies, Christmas is for those who will find it the hardest to enjoy. It really is for those who hate it most."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matt B. Redmond, *Christmas Is for Those Who Hate It Most*, Dec. 16, 2010.  
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2010/12/16/christmas-is-for-those-who-hate-it-most/>

- And that's what we saw two weeks ago when we looked at the birth announcement to Zechariah. The Christmas story begins with God's grace for an elderly, childless, disgraced couple. Christmas is for those in darkness.

### Transition

Today we're going to focus on the birth announcement to Mary and Joseph. The two stories, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Joseph and Mary, are incredibly similar. Intentionally similar.

- Both couples are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are promised the miraculous birth of a son. Both are equally unfit to have a child. Elizabeth is barren. Mary is a virgin. Both respond to Gabriel's announcement with questions. How? But in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Gabriel's announcement relieves them of their shame and disgrace; even in their old age they're going to have a son.
- And in Mary's case the angel's announcement has the exact opposite effect. Gabriel's announcement doesn't alleviate disgrace. From a purely human point of view Gabriel's announcement brings Mary shame and disgrace and disrepute.

### Transition

Turn in your Bibles to **Luke 1:26-38**.

- *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.*
- God sends Gabriel on a second mission of vastly different proportions than the first. Gabriel's first mission was to Zechariah, a priest in Jerusalem; a man on the top strata of society in the cultural and religious epicenter of the country, Jerusalem. His second mission is to one of the least significant places in Israel; this tiny, little, out-of-the-way hamlet some 45-80 miles north of the capital city Jerusalem, a podunk, backwater, backwoods town called Nazareth. And in this unincorporated spec on the map he's to seek out a poor, teenage girl named Mary. Mary is probably no older than fourteen when Gabriel visits her. She's a tween; she's barely beyond [Hannah Montana](#) but Luke says she's *pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David*.
- The *pledged to be married* means Mary was in the initial stage of engagement, which wasn't all that unusual for a girl her age. Forget about first dates and sweet sixteen, Mary's family and Joseph's family had already come to a formal, witnessed agreement of marriage. A financial exchange between the two families had taken place, the bride price had already been paid. Even though she's only fourteen, Mary legally belonged to

Joseph and publically would have been referred to as his wife. This engagement period to Joseph would last about a year before an official ceremony would take place and Joseph would take Mary home to consummate the marriage.

- Practically speaking, Mary's life at this point, pre-Gabriel, is simple but peacefully perfect. There's no drama, no craziness. It's the exact opposite of Elizabeth. Elizabeth is old. Mary is young. Elizabeth is barren and disgraced. Mary's life is full of promise. She has her whole ahead of her still. She's engaged to a standup guy, Joseph.
- In Matthew's Gospel Joseph's described as a righteous man. He's a man with good bloodlines, a descendent of King David the text says. He's employed. He has a respectable trade. Life is just about perfect for Mary. Prior to Gabriel's announcement she's looking forward to a normal life and an uncomplicated future. And God sends Gabriel and her world is turned upside down.

### Transition

Look at [verse 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.*
- Usually, an expecting mother gets to shock her husband and parents and girlfriends with the news of a pregnancy. And everybody's happy. And it's a joyous occasion. And the sun is shining and the birds are singing and [John Paul Young's Love is in the Air](#) is playing on the 8-track in the background.
- In this instance Mary's the one who is shocked. Gabriel dumps unexpected, even unwelcome news on her. Gabriel's words disturb her. *Mary was greatly troubled at his words.* The troubling for Mary is that God's favor toward her means she's going to miraculously conceive and give birth to a son even though she's not yet married? This is what it means to be highly favored by God? This is what it means to be the undeserved recipient of God's grace?<sup>2</sup> How do his grace and an out of wedlock teenage pregnancy go together? No wonder she's troubled.
- If you have a teenage daughter or son just imagine how you'd feel if they came to you with the news Mary's been given. If you're a teenager and you have to tell your parents this kind of news are you expecting a calm, rationale, favorable response from the parental figures? Someone's about to

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<sup>2</sup> Bock, p. 109.

blow their top. Forget the keep calm and carry on garbage. It's freak out and throw stuff time in Mary's house. The family name has been disgraced, dragged through the mud.

- In Mary's day you get taken to the city square and stoned to death for stuff like this. Even though from God's perspective there's unlimited upside and hope and joy to Gabriel's announcement, on the surface, and from a purely human point of view, the news almost certainly caused a darkness and a blackness and a confusion in Mary's life that wasn't there before.
- **Matthew 1:19** tells us that when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy he flipped out like all men who learn their significant other is pregnant and he's not the father. He wanted to divorce her. *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.* Imagine the conversation Mary has with Joseph. "But Joseph, listen to me. I haven't been sleeping around." Think of the tears on Mary's part; there aren't enough boxes of Kleenex around.
- And Joseph's not listening. He wants no part of it; he wants to distance himself from Mary. His plan is to divorce her. Fortunately for Mary Joseph is content with a quiet divorce. In other words, he's not looking to press charges; he's content with a quiet divorce instead of the public disgrace that ends with Mary bloodied and dead under a pile of rocks.
- See, here's the thing. When Christ comes into your life, expect him to disturb and upset things. Like Mary, expect God to turn your perfect little world upside down. How does Mary respond? Is Mary upset by this? Does she have a pity party because her world has come crashing down? Does she mourn for the life she could've had? What's Mary's response?
- Mary's trusting response to Gabriel's news is as instructive as it is remarkable. **Verse 38.** *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."* In other words, "amen, Gabriel, may it be so."
- One of the lessons of this text is that Mary was a disciple of Christ before she was even his mother. How about you? Are you trying to do the whole Christmas thing without being Jesus' disciple? It can't be done; you can't have it both ways. The Christmas story, for all the joy and wonder and excitement and anticipation and hope, is a call to radical discipleship.
- I think one thing we absolutely must do as part of our Christmas preparations is contemplate the cost of discipleship and following Jesus. Christmas divorced from discipleship really isn't Christmas. You can't cherish the manger, on the one hand, and deny the cross on the other. Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but*

whoever loses his life for me will save it. And we are to say in response as Mary said, "May it be to me as you have said."

### Transition

Even though Mary is exemplary in her discipleship, ultimately, this story isn't about Mary, is it?

- Certain traditions have isolated Mary as this unique person who's elevated above ordinary humanity. To read that into this is to miss Luke's point. Mary is not the Queen of Heaven, or the token female in the Trinity, or a goddess. She has no titles or special sway in heaven. She is not the giver of grace. She is the recipient of undeserved grace and favor as [verse 30](#) says. Do you remember what Jesus said on the way to the cross? *A woman in the crowd called out [to Jesus], "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." 28 [Jesus] replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."*<sup>3</sup> Mary is an ordinary woman who is no more blessed or favored than we are.
- This story, ultimately, isn't about Mary. It's about a Savior named Jesus. When Gabriel tells Mary she's going to miraculously conceive it's not for the purpose of elevating Mary. It's for the purpose of God elevating himself. Mary is going to birth the Messiah. A Savior.
- [Verse 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."*
- [34](#) *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*
- Jesus will be called great. He will have an everlasting kingdom. He will be holy. Somehow, God, through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, would cause Mary to conceive without any human male intervention. What this text teaches us is that the salvation we celebrate at Christmas is a work of God and can never, ever come through human effort. Is that how you see salvation through Christ? Or do you still think you play some part, some role or that it's dependent upon your effort?
- John's Gospel says *the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it*. From God's perspective you've failed to comprehend the light of Christmas if you think salvation comes any other way. The virgin birth demands that we recognize the sovereign, omnipotent, almighty hand of God to save apart from any and all human intervention.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 11:27-28

- I don't know about you but every year I need to be reminded of this part of the Christmas miracle. Because my situation is hopelessly dark. And if God doesn't miraculously intervene to save me, I'm toast. I need a King whose kingdom will never end or fail, [verse 33](#), because the little kingdom of my life that I've created for myself, independent of God's rule, is a crumbling, ruinous mess. I need the birth of a *holy one*, [verse 35](#), perfect, without sin, because I am a prisoner in the darkness of my own unholiness. I need a salvation that comes to me independent of my human effort because my best efforts were never very good to begin with.

## Conclusion

- Who is Christmas for? Christmas is really about the gospel of grace for sinners. Because of the cross, the manger becomes the most hopeful place in a universe darkened with hopelessness. It's for people who know they are dead and need life. [John 1:4](#). *In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* It's for those who are at the end of their rope. It's for those who are blanketed in darkness and are desperate for the dawn. And it's for you if have the guts to admit to God that what you need more than anything else this Christmas is a Savior.
- But you have to ask him. And you have to trust, like Mary, that what God says about Jesus is true for you as well. [A.W. Tozer](#) has said "Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, he can do for you."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Citation: As seen in *Leadership Weekly* (10-09-02)