

The Nativity

Mary and Joseph

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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Have you ever looked back on your life and noticed that how you answered one question radically altered the direction that your life would go? Sometimes you are aware of those moments. The question does carry that weight with it, but at other times it seems like an insignificant question with an insignificant answer. Some of these questions that we would look back on would be questions like, will you marry me?

Are you willing to take the job transfer out of state? Do you want to try chemo? Do you want a drink? Do you want to go for a ride? Do you want to buy this house? All questions that can carry with them a weight that alters the direction of your life. For me, that moment came in the fall of 2012. I was 30 years old and I had been working at the church for a little over eight years as the Director of Teen Ministries.

Carolyn, my wife was a stay-at-home mom with our two-year-old son, and she was pregnant with our second child. Mariah was due in late December. The youth ministry at the church was going great, and I was truly loving every minute of it. After eight years, I had felt like I had finally wrapped my arms around it, and we were hitting our stride. We had just returned that summer in July from one of my favorite mission trips that I ever took.

We took a group of teenagers to São Paulo, Brazil, and God did some amazing things, not just in the people we were ministering to there, but also in our hearts and our lives of all of those that went. The school year had started and we were in full swing of youth ministry. Then Pastor Norm, who had been the pastor at Fairview for 38 years at that time, called me into his office.

Pastor Norm asked me to sit down and he said, "I would like you to become the next senior pastor at Fairview Missionary Church." I think I kept my poker face on, but in my head, I shouted, "No way." I loved what I was doing with the teens, and I was only 30 years old, and so having the title of senior pastor sounded a little weird.

I had also been in the church world long enough to know that most pastors who take over after a pastor that had been at a church for a long period of time didn't go well. And with Pastor Norm at that time, having been here for 38 years, that certainly counted as long-term. I had been in the church world long enough to know that there was even a name, a title that was given to those pastors that took over after a long-term pastor, and they were called the sacrificial lamb, that was their name.

That is because on average, if you look at churches, they would only stay for one to two years, and then the church would ask them to leave because they were so used to the other guy that had been there, and then somebody else could come in and kind of move the church in a direction. Now add to the fact that becoming a senior pastor was never on my bingo card of life. It was not something I longed for or dreamed about. I was content with being a youth pastor my entire life.

And yet, with all of that going through my head, I still responded how most Christians should respond, right? I will pray about it. That's what I said. And that is what I did. I went home and I talked to Carolyn about it. I

remember calling my parents on the phone. I talked to my friends and my spiritual mentors about it, and I did actually spend time praying about it.

I knew this was one of those decisions that was going to drastically alter the direction of my life, really, no matter how I answered. In the end, though, the only thing that mattered was what God wanted me to do. I was trying to answer the question, "Was I being called to this?" After over a month, I went back into Pastor Norm's office and I said, "Yes, I am willing to go down this path, but only if my title can be lead pastor because senior pastor sounds way too old." He graciously agreed, and I never imagined my life looking like it does.

Thirteen years later, we are still here and I am grateful that you haven't fired me yet, all right? Not the sacrificial lamb, but I will openly admit, I do blame you for making my hair go gray faster, all right? I think I would have a lot darker hair had I not said yes to that. Now I share that story because you all have stories that are similar to that. You all can look back at times in your life when you made one decision that changed everything for you.

Today, I want to take some time to focus on the stories of Mary and Joseph, because both of them were also asked a question in their life. They experienced one of these life-altering moments, and for them, it came at a very young age. They were living their lives. They were making plans. They were dreaming about the future together. When all of a sudden, God shows up with a different script, and it was one that didn't make any earthly sense.

How would Mary respond to the angel's announcement that her life was about to change in ways that she couldn't predict, she couldn't control, and she couldn't understand? And Joseph, would he believe Mary's impossible explanation of her pregnancy, or would he quietly step away from the woman he loved to protect both of their reputations? Now, of course, you know the story well.

You know the decisions that both of them made. In the face of the unknown, the costly, the risky, both Mary and Joseph found the courage to say yes, Lord. Today, I want to look at three key truths from their lives that can transform how you and I respond to God's invitations and his questions in our lives. Let me pray, and then we're going to begin in Luke chapter 1.

We're going to look at Matthew, Mark, and Luke's presentation of the Christmas story. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we come before You, taking time to remember the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus, our Savior. And as we look at that story, we see real people, Mary and Joseph, as well as others that were given an opportunity to make a decision, to answer a question.

And I thank you for their courage that they said yes, understanding that there is no possible way they could conceive what that actually meant for their lives. But I pray that we would follow in their footsteps, that we would have the courage to say yes to you, not knowing everything that that means, but having faith instead of fear. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Luke tells us the story in chapter 1, beginning in verse 26. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth in a town of Galilee to a virgin who was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored, for the Lord is with you." Now, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God, for you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great, and He will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give Him the throne of His Father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever, and His kingdom will never end." "How will this be?" Mary asked the angel, "Since I am a virgin." And the angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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." Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

For no word from God will ever fail. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled, and then the angel left her." Let me give you a little bit of the backstory here. Of course, Mary was a young woman. Most biblical theologians believe that at this time she would have probably been just a teenager. She lived in this small town of Nazareth in northern Israel, which is probably compared to Angola, Indiana.

Just a small town, a farming community kind of off the highway, not many people went to Nazareth. In that culture, being engaged to somebody was legally binding. Not so much like today where you can get engaged and break off your engagement. If you were engaged, it was more similar to marriage. And if a young lady were to get pregnant before her wedding, it meant a serious social scandal.

It could mean rejection from her family. And even in extreme cases, it could mean death. And so here in this story, Luke shares with us that Mary is going about her normal life when God's messenger shows up with news that will change everything for her and for the world. Here we see our first truth. God often comes in unexpected ways.

As we read the story and as you know the history of Israel as a nation, you would think that God would send this angel Gabriel to the palace in Jerusalem. That was a house of power. They could have impacted many people, but he doesn't send Gabriel to the palace in Jerusalem. You would think that Gabriel would have appeared maybe to a high priest in the temple. He could have had influence on the people, but that's not where Gabriel shows up.

Instead, Gabriel shows up to Mary in an ordinary day when she probably woke up expecting to do ordinary things. You see, God's biggest invitations often arrive in our most ordinary moments. And so the question for us today is, are you prepared? Are you prepared for God's potential call to interrupt your comfort, to interrupt your routine?

Maybe it would be good for us to start our days in submission to God that when we wake up, we would say, "God, whatever you want for us today, help me to be obedient." Because today, tomorrow, maybe even next week, might be the moment that you are asked the question where your answer could change everything. And if it isn't you, maybe it's somebody around you.

And so for you, we should be asking the question, how can you be supportive of those around you who might be called upon by God to do something out of the ordinary? We need to learn to be encouragers, to lift those people up, to remind them that obedience is the best option, that you and I would learn to walk with those individuals and to become an encouragement to them because often God's ask of us doesn't make any worldly sense.

And so it's very possible that those around us, when they say yes to God's call upon their lives, there will be many that would flood in and say, "You're crazy, you're losing your mind. Why are you doing this?" And you and I can learn to be an encouragement because obedience to God's plans often cost us something. Obedience to God's plan often costs us something. Matthew tells the story in chapter 1, starting in verse 18, and he gives us a little more detail.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. But because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. There, you're seeing the culture. The engagement was much more than just an engagement.

It was much closer to marriage. But after Joseph had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is

conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Can you imagine Joseph trying to make sense of this? I'd have a lot of questions at that point, wouldn't you men? Like, what do you mean? What is this all about?

And the angel says to him, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins." Matthew tells us all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

So when Joseph woke up, Matthew tells us that he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and he took Mary home as his wife, but he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus. Here we see Joseph's impossible choice. Joseph, a young man himself, Scripture says that he was a craftsman.

This Greek word can mean carpenter, which is many of us we remember Joseph as a carpenter, but it also could mean a mason or even a general contractor, but he worked with his hands, which means in the small town of Nazareth, he had a business to run. Whether it was his own or his families, he had a reputation to retain. And he had a community that knew Joseph as a faithful law-abiding man. That's what Matthew tells us. And then Mary shows up pregnant.

Can you imagine that conversation? Mary is trying to convince him that an angel showed up and she's now carrying the Son of God. Can you imagine Joseph being like, "Mary, you have to have a better story than that." I mean, come on, this can't be real. You're trying to convince me that an angel showed up and now you're pregnant with the Son of God. So, not surprisingly, as we read the story, Joseph doesn't buy it. Because he had every legal, social, and religious right to walk away, he decided, "I'm just going to get out of this." But we do see Joseph's character.

Matthew tells us that he was going to do it in such a way to protect Mary from public shame. He was going to divorce her quietly. But then God shows up and He interrupts Joseph's plans. He interrupts his dreams for the future of what life is going to look like, and God's plan was going to cost Joseph something. It meant accepting the public misunderstanding and gossip that would inevitably come.

It meant that his reputation was going to take a hit along with his business. It meant that people were going to point, they were going to whisper, and they were going to make assumptions about His character. Mary's yes to God certainly also had costs. Her relationship with Joseph was on the line. Would he believe this? Her standing in the community, her family's honor, and maybe even her life.

And yet both Mary and Joseph chose faith over fear. They chose obedience over reputation, and they chose God's approval over public opinion. What type of courage is God asking of you today? What is His question to you of which He wants you to respond, "Yes, are you mulling over in your mind because you're counting the costs?" Maybe it's leaving a secure job to start some type of ministry that God has placed on your heart.

Maybe it's God calling you and your family to serve overseas as missionaries to share the love of Jesus. Maybe it's standing up for your faith when it might cost you something professionally. Maybe it's choosing forgiveness in a situation when everyone expects and would fully understand if you just remained angry. Maybe it's giving generously when it means that you're going to need to cut back on your lifestyle, give up something that you want.

Are you willing to follow God's call even when it costs you your comfort, your reputation, or your security? Can I encourage you, even as I encourage myself, don't let the fear of what others might think keep you from doing what God is asking you to do, because God's promises are worth the risk. God's promises are always worth the risk.

Luke gives us some more information in His gospel of this time and what happens with Mary and Joseph and Jesus in Luke chapter 2, starting in verse 1. Luke tells us that in those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that

a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. He tells us this was the first census that took place while Curinius was governor of Syria. And so everyone went to their own town to register.

So also Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house in line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. The fulfillment of God's promises in Mary and Joseph's life didn't come wrapped in comfort or convenience, did they? It was a 90-mile trip by foot and donkey. Mary was nine months pregnant, and when they arrived, as if it wasn't bad enough being somewhere else that you were not used to, there was no place for them to stay.

And so, when the baby was ready to be born, the delivery room was a stable. The baby's first bed was a trough, and there was no attending medical staff to help. I try to put myself in Joseph's shoes. I know that in my own experience of having children being in the delivery room and knowing that there's doctors there and there's nurses there and everything is sterile and taken care of and clean, and literally my only job was to stand there and offer support that I still was anxious in that moment?

I couldn't imagine being Joseph having to deliver his first child and knowing that that child is the Son of God. I'm sure He kept repeating to Himself, "Don't mess up, don't mess up," right? This is big. And there they were in a manger. They're in a stable, but this is what God had planned.

Mary and Joseph were told, remember, by the angel Gabriel and Joseph in a dream that they were going to be parents of the son most high, that he was going to sit on David's throne, and he was going to rule over all of Israel for all of time, being that that's what the angel told them. Do you think that Mary and Joseph saw this playing out how it did? That they were going to give birth in a dirty stable surrounded by the smells of sound and cattle?

I doubt it. I don't think that's the picture they had in their mind when they said yes. But when they looked down at the face of Jesus and they were able to hold Him for that first time, they were holding the fulfillment of every promise that God had ever made. Emmanuel, God with us. And so you and I need to be reminded in our struggles that sometimes God's promises to us don't remove the struggles, but they make the struggle worth it.

Remember that God's promises to us require often perseverance before you see their fulfillment, that you and I need to stay in it for the long haul because there are going to be moments and seasons of doubt. You and I need to learn from Mary and Joseph not to give up on what God has called us to do because you and I don't see immediate results.

Mary's yes brought the Savior into the world and Joseph's yes gave that Savior a home and protection and a Father's love. Their obedience to God literally changed the course of human history. Your yes matters to God just as much. Your willingness to say yes to God might mean bringing Jesus' presence into your home, into your family, into your workplace, and into your neighborhood.

Understanding that saying yes to God's plan will likely cost you something. It might lead you somewhere that you never expected. But we are promised that you will grow and you will go on an amazing journey and He will be with you. The same God who was faithful to Mary and Joseph is the same God who will be faithful to you and to me. And so what is God asking you to say yes to?

What invitation have you been avoiding because it seems too risky to you? What dream has he placed on your heart that you have been too afraid to pursue? My prayer for us is that this Christmas, we would let the inspiration of Mary and Joseph inspire us to say yes to God.

I know that as I look back on my life, as I think back to that fall day in July or in 2012, saying yes to what Pastor Norm had asked me, I in no way knew what that meant. And saying yes has had certainly its costs. When I said yes, I had to be willing to be the sacrificial lamb. Again, fortunately, by God's grace, I haven't been yet. But there are many days that I look back and I say, what would have happened if I said no?

What would life look like? Even though I love you, guys, there are plenty of days that I wish I would have said no and not yes. But God has been faithful through the struggles. Sure, there have been cost in the sense that my reputation at times has been ruined in the community because of rumors that go about that aren't true, or because of decisions that I have to make because of my position that people don't like. And so those rumors continue to spread.

People say things about you, they think things about you. I remember some of the first hard decisions I had to make. It was the first time in my life that I was literally afraid to go running along the street for fear that somebody was going to swerve their car and hit me because they didn't like me that much. There are costs and those are small. You all have costs to saying yes to Jesus, but it's the best thing you can do. It's the best journey that you can be on.

Your willingness to say yes when you can't see the whole picture can change everything for you, your family, and the world around you. Will you say yes? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, multiple times in our lives, we are offered a question. And how we answer that question often doesn't just dramatically change our future, but it changes the world around us.

And so, Father, my prayer for us today is that we would be obedient, that we would be willing to say yes like Mary and Joseph did, not knowing all of the costs, but certainly knowing it was going to change maybe what they had desired at that time. And so, Father, give us the courage to say yes. Help us to be obedient to you, that Your Spirit might be poured out upon us, and we might see You do a mighty work amongst us.

Father, this Christmas, may we be reminded of who You are. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.