

SERIES: Advent 2006

SERMON: **His Amazing Mother: Why Evangelicals Can and Should Embrace Mary**

SCRIPTURE: **Luke 1-3**

SPEAKER: **Pastor Dick High** (Michael P. Andrus researched and authored this sermon. Dick High presented it in Mike's absence due to the death of his father.)

DATE: December 17, 2006

Scripture reading (earlier in the service): Luke 1:26-45

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin 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! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Special Introduction to Sermon

As related earlier in today's service, Pastor Mike's father, Dr. Roger J. Andrus, died Wednesday evening. (Mike wrote a wonderful tribute to his father Thursday morning.) With the funeral service yesterday afternoon, and desiring to maximize the opportunity to spend time with immediate and more extended family last evening and today as well, that necessitated Pastor Mike being out of the pulpit this morning.

As the implications of that for today's services were discussed, it was decided that it would be good to proceed with the already planned follow up to last Sunday's sermon. That was possible because all the research and even compilation of the sermon text had already been completed by Pastor Mike. He graciously handed that to me on Thursday morning. My task has been to own that material in a way

that both honors and represents its author and allows for a personal presentation of some important Biblical truth.

I perhaps am more nervous than usual this morning primarily out of the respect that I have for Pastor Mike's abilities in presenting God's word to us so lovingly, consistently, and faithfully. My desire is that I can convey the Biblical truth that is our focus of attention today in a way that captures our hearts, even though the messenger is different.

So as we begin I will read the introduction statement found in the bulletin outline insert to give context to today's sermon.

Last Lord's Day we looked at Mary, the Mother of Jesus, focusing primarily on the doctrines of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, demonstrating that they elevate Mary more than they should. Today Mary continues to be the focus of our attention; however with the desire that we understand why Mary should be more widely embraced by evangelicals than she is.

The Virgin Mary is one of the greatest women of faith and the most honored mother of Scripture, and certainly she is one of the central figures in the Nativity of our Lord. However, despite the fact that the Bible speaks more often and more highly of her than any other woman, it is rare that she is even mentioned in Protestant churches, and almost never is she the full subject of a sermon, much less two sermons. There are various reasons for this.

Perhaps many people have a hard time relating to Mary because of her uniqueness. She is the only virgin to conceive a child in human history, and she is the only mother to have a perfect Son. For centuries artists have put halos on her head, which tends to further separate her from the rest of us. Someone might even be tempted to ask,

"If the pastor is going to choose a godly woman to hold up as an example and encouragement for us, why not choose one of like passions as we are, someone whose life was full of problems like ours is, someone who had 3 or 4 screaming kids around the house, someone whose children struggled spiritually, someone whose husband was just an ordinary guy—in other words, someone we could really identify with?"

Well, that is exactly my intent this morning; for I believe we can identify with the Mary of the Bible (that may not be true regarding the Mary of Church Tradition, but I believe it is possible with the Mary of the Bible!). To my knowledge she did not wear a halo. She was a woman of like passions as we are. She did have similar problems as mothers have today, and no doubt *even greater* ones. Let me ask, "How many of you who are mothers had to ride miles on a donkey when nine months pregnant and then have your baby in a place designed for farm animals?" True, she didn't have 3 or 4 screaming kids around the house...she had at least six, besides Jesus! Her children did have spiritual problems; in fact, her four boys were not believers until they were adults. Her husband was an ordinary guy—apparently an uneducated laborer who died at a young age, leaving her a single mother. I don't believe Mary's uniqueness in a few areas means we can't relate to her. Neither does it justify ignoring her, as Protestants have often done.

Although I have not personally seen *The Nativity Story* that is currently in movie theaters in our city, I am told that it is a wonderful movie (Pastor Mike describes it as “very realistic”). The portrayal of the character of Mary is much more realistic than the Madonnas of medieval art. The movie avoids most doctrinal controversies but clearly portrays the Virgin Birth as fact. It also reveals the deep struggles that Mary and Joseph must have endured.

I offer another reason why we evangelicals have given short shrift to this amazing mother—we have simply reacted against those churches that have given her *more* attention than she deserves. When someone swings the pendulum too far in one direction, it is our tendency to swing it to the opposite extreme. I think that is largely what has happened in regard to Mary. Let’s stop the pendulum and seek a true biblical balance.

Last week we sought to clearly convey the belief that the Roman Catholic churches, and to a lesser extent the Eastern Orthodox, are mistaken in the *degree* to which they have venerated Mary, the mother of Jesus. They have developed doctrines over the centuries that elevate her to a position above what she is given in Scripture. We looked at some of these doctrines: her Immaculate Conception, the view that Mary herself was born without original sin; her Perpetual Virginity, the view that she was never intimate with Joseph, even after their marriage and that the other children ascribed to her in Scripture are really step-children; her Bodily Assumption into Heaven; and her intercessory work as Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix of mankind. Only with the term “Mother of God” did we find common ground, since Jesus was certainly God; but even at that point it was suggested that a better term would be the biblical designation, “the Mother of my Lord,” as spoken by Elizabeth in Luke 1:43.

We noted that the reason these Marian doctrines are widely accepted today in Catholic churches is that they claim a dual source of authority—the Scriptures and Church Tradition. If we stick strictly with Scripture, we will not find sufficient grounds to affirm these doctrines (and in some cases we will find sufficient basis to reject them), but we should not reject Mary as a great woman of God.

Don't ever forget that God chose Mary, a lowly maiden from Nazareth, from all the women of history, to perform the marvelous task of bringing His Son into the world. I believe it was the heart longing of every godly woman of Israel to bear the promised Messiah. Yet it was to Mary alone that the angel Gabriel spoke those profound words, "Blessed are you among women." If God set her apart above all other women it seems to me that she is a fitting subject for a sermon, even in a Protestant church (or perhaps I should say, *especially* in a Protestant church; after all, it is our claim that we preach the whole counsel of God).

In our examination of Mary’s life today, we will organize our thoughts around the eight times when Mary speaks in the NT. In the process we will encounter a number of spiritual qualities in her that are not only to be admired, but also to be emulated. The first time Mary speaks, as seen in our Scripture reading this morning, we find her expressing confusion at an incredible announcement.

Mary expresses confusion at an incredible announcement. (Luke 1:34)

The angel Gabriel comes to her and tells her that she has found favor with God, but he also announces

she will be with child and will give birth to a son. This was astounding and very troubling news. Mary may have been a peasant girl but she wasn't naive. She knew how babies were conceived and she knew there was no way she should be pregnant. Luke 1:34 reveals her question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Paul Stolwyk expresses it in more modern terms: "You know, Gabriel, help me out here. I just finished biology this year. And I know I didn't get a good grade, but if I remember right, uhh . . . how is this gonna work?" Luke 1:34-37 provides the angel's response:

"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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

We have mostly very sanitized views of Mary. She is often pictured as a slender, rested woman in blue, kneeling with hands folded at the clean feeding trough with a halo above her head. Let's correct that image. Here is a young teenage woman, probably about 14 years old. (Yes, you heard that correctly!) Imagine the scene she will face when she arrives at home after her visit with Gabriel and shares his announcement with her parents. Her father will assume the culprit is Joseph and will need to repent of his initial reaction. Mary will explain that it is not Joseph. Her father will ask,

"Who is it then?"

"Well, father, you may find this hard to believe, but God has done this."

"Where did you get an idea like that?"

"An angel told me!"

"Hmm. . . Honey, get Prairie View on the phone!"

There are only two alternatives concerning Mary—either she was a pure and holy young woman or she was immoral and a liar as well. The latter is the choice of everyone who challenges the Bible's clear teaching regarding the Virgin Birth. And without the Virgin Birth we not only have a promiscuous Mary, but also a fallible Bible, and worst of all, a strictly human Jesus. That's a big price to pay for rejecting Scripture's simple witness.

The second time Mary speaks is in Luke 1:38.

Mary, despite her confusion and fear, affirms her total submission to God's will. (Luke 1:38)

Following her initial question as to "How?", Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement is simply this: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Incredible! That is truly an astounding response considering the circumstances. Mary is betrothed to Joseph, undoubtedly through an arranged marriage, and it is not unreasonable to suspect that she is in the process of falling in love with him. The two have planned a wedding and are eagerly looking forward to spending the rest of their lives together.

Imagine the anguish Mary experiences as she wrestles with how to tell the one she loves that she is pregnant. Is it realistic to hope that Joseph will understand? He may be a godly man, but can he be expected to accept her account? This is possibly why Mary decides to go in haste to Elizabeth's house to spend three months—it will give her a chance to process the event and help her decide how to tell

Joseph.

The important thing is that Mary is TOTALLY SUBMISSIVE to the will of her heavenly Father!!! She would rather risk losing her lover than to displease her Savior. Alva McAllister has written,

"In the instant of the angelic greeting, did Mary have any prophetic awareness that her acceptance and submission would mean an arduous trip over interminable hills during the final stages of pregnancy? Did Mary have any inkling that "be it unto me" would mean an exile in Egypt, and the sword piercings that would come to her own heart when her son was pierced by a Roman blade? Perhaps she did. One would think, however, that she did not yet know what she gave assent to; that like any of us she agreed sight unseen; that her acceptance of God's will was just that, acceptance of God's will. Acceptance of the unknown, the never before experienced, the potentially ominous; acceptance of that which may carry a bitter price to the ego of the one who says, "be it unto me."

Some of you may be in “Mary-like” situations. Through no choice of your own, you are experiencing physical pain, emotional hardship or possibly even derision for your faith. You may be angry, confused, depressed, or even frantic. Stop and think; how often it occurs that the glory of God is revealed through the veil of human hardship. Think about Job and Joseph and Paul and Jesus Himself. Oddly, when we list the great heroes of faith, we often leave Mary off the list. Surely she belongs near the top of an elite group—a teenager who shows us how to walk with God and respond to heavy burdens! Mary exhibits an amazing spirit of submission.

Mary offers words of encouragement and blessing. (Luke 1:39)

Listen as I read again the words beginning in Luke 1:39: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth." Now we are not told the words Mary speaks, but we are told about the results. It says, “When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” You see Elizabeth is already six-months pregnant, carrying the child who would one day be known as John the Baptizer, the Forerunner of Messiah.

Mary's words bring such encouragement and blessing to her cousin that Elizabeth exclaims in a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child *you* will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me.” Obviously, Elizabeth recognizes that as much as she herself is blessed to be pregnant (considering the fact that she has been childless and is advanced in years), Mary is even more blessed to be carrying a child who would be the Savior of the World. While she is excited about her own pregnancy, she is truly overwhelmed by Mary’s.

Now this affirmation of Elizabeth causes Mary to speak a fourth time, showing herself to be a woman of praise and worship.

Mary delivers a profound hymn of praise and worship. (Luke 1:46-56)

Let's read verses 46-56 of Luke 1, a passage known as the Magnificat.

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

The passage concludes with these words: "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home."

This hymn reveals that Mary has an incredible knowledge of the Old Testament and a deep understanding of the nature and character of God. (I remind us that this is a young woman of perhaps no more than 14 years of age.) In this short hymn she quotes or alludes to Genesis, 1 and 2 Samuel, Psalms, Job, Isaiah, and Micah. She takes up themes from Sarah, wife of Abraham, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Note just the characteristics, attributes, and works of God she explicitly mentions:

He is worthy of glory: "my soul glorifies the Lord."

He is her personal Savior: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

He is gracious: "The Mighty One has done great things for me."

He is holy: "Holy is His name."

He is merciful: "His mercy extends to those who fear him."

He is omnipotent: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm."

He is omniscient: "He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."

He is sovereign: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."

He is benevolent: "He has helped his servant Israel."

To compose a song like this Mary must have had a breadth and a depth to her understanding of Scripture that puts a fifty-seven-year-old pastor to shame. One of the tragedies of the 20th century is that so few people, even believers, really know God. And they don't know God because they don't know the Scriptures. That could never be said of Mary.

By the way, a spirit of praise and worship is not always demonstrated verbally or in song. Mary also knows how to worship in silence. Please turn to Luke 2:16, where we find the shepherds seeking the baby Jesus. It says, "So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. *But Mary* treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The contrast seems to be between those who were amazed and thus probably babbled incessantly about what they heard, and Mary, who quietly ponders and meditates about the meaning of it all.

Mary perhaps had more to ponder in connection with the birth of her son than do other expecting parents, but there is sufficient of the mysterious, the supernatural and the wonderful in the life of any

child to cause a parent's heart to ponder over—the origin of that life, what it will become, what it will accomplish, and what its eternal destiny will be. Mary is a woman of worship and meditation, and we should learn from her how to worship—whether in word, in song, or in silence.

Mary dedicates her Son to God in the Temple. (Luke 2:22-40)

In Luke 2:21 we are told that just eight days after Jesus' birth his parents bring Him to the temple in Jerusalem to circumcise Him and to present Him to the Lord. This was a solemn occasion requiring a sacrifice from the parents. Mary's exact words are not revealed to us here, but we know from history that part of the presentation service involved both parents affirming their desire to surrender control of their child's life to God, accepting His will as their will. This was no superficial action on Mary's part, for several very troubling prophecies about her son were delivered at His dedication.

You will notice from verses 25 and 36 that a devout and righteous man and a very old prophetess—named Simeon and Anna, respectively—are moved by the Spirit of God to approach Mary and Joseph in the Temple and speak about their Child's future. We have time only to look at what Simeon says in verse 34:

"Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. (Notice now his final words!) And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"

Little could Mary imagine at that moment the anguish she would one day feel as she witnessed: the hatred and ridicule heaped upon her Son during His ministry, the injustice and cruelty during His trial, the pain and agony of His cross. The pain would be all the greater because she, of all people, would know that He was not guilty of any crime. In all the years since His birth He would be a perfect child. He never sassed her like the other children did on occasion, he was never disobedient, he was always responsive in his duties toward his parents and God. But despite the promised pain, Mary's readiness and willingness to dedicate Her Son to God is seen in verse 39: "When Joseph and Mary had done *everything* required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth."

The next two times Mary speaks in the Gospels we see her humanity in its weakness and frailty. But that's OK. One of the tragic things we sometimes do with our heroes and heroines is to elevate them to the place where they are no longer touchable or even real. I think Mary's humanity is denied when we add extra-biblical traditions that distort her true character. In Luke 3:48-50 we see a little vignette about Jesus' visit to the temple at twelve years of age.

Mary reveals motherly consternation. (Luke 2:48-50).

If you're perhaps not acquainted with this passage, here's the story. After the Feast of the Passover Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem as his parents started on the journey back to Nazareth, thinking all the time that He was with them. I doubt if serial killers were a problem then, but every parent of a young child can appreciate the fear that must have come over Joseph and Mary when they realized their son was not in the caravan. They began searching for him and finally, after three days, find him back in

the temple in Jerusalem, sitting among the clergy, listening to them and asking questions. I'll begin reading in verse 47:

"Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he was saying to them."

It is quite interesting that even after this mild reprimand Jesus gave to Mary, we read in verse 51: "He went down with them, and came to Nazareth; and He *continued* in subjection to them." I imagine it was not easy for Mary to exercise parental authority over Jesus; it is plausible to think that consternation was a frequent experience, somewhat like it would be with any parent trying to rear a child prodigy. We have enough trouble trying to balance the *average* teenager's need for counsel and direction with his need to develop independence at the same time. Imagine what it would be like to be given parental responsibility over the *Son of God*?

The next time Mary is mentioned is some two decades later, and Jesus is in His early thirties. I think it would be interesting to know more about his teen years or his 20's, but we don't. Some of the apocryphal Gospels fill in the blanks for us, but they are so fanciful and unrealistic that they're hardly worth reading.

Mary exhibits motherly interference. (John 2:1-5)

We read in John 2, "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." It was a tragedy to run out of wine at an ancient wedding, and Mary is obviously trying to help the host save face. But her action is seen by Jesus as unwarranted interference into His divine timetable. Here is how He responds: "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come."

The words of Jesus here are not disrespectful. However, I believe He is trying to reiterate to His mother (as already expressed in Luke 2) that she cannot think of Him as merely *her* son. His ultimate devotion is to doing His Father's will, *not* His mother's; and if He is going to respond to her inquiry, it will not be through pressure, subtle or otherwise. He will respond because His heavenly Father wants Him to do so.

Now if Mary understood that message, and I believe she did, it is curious that she responds as she does in verse 5, where she says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you"? A good explanation of this response is that while she accepts the fact that she has no right to tell Him what to do, she is confident He will nevertheless do what is right and kind and merciful. She recognizes that while Jesus is independent He is not indifferent.

There is a lesson here for all of us. Jesus is our Lord and sovereign; He is not a genie whom we can order around nor a power we are free to manipulate! And yet while He is sovereign, He is also

sensitive and wants us to bring even the insignificant problems in our lives to Him. When we do that, we also need to be willing to follow Mary's advice: "Do whatever He tells you."

The eighth and final time Mary speaks in the New Testament is early in the Book of Acts.

Mary seeks healing for her broken heart through prayer and fellowship. (Acts 1:14)

Mary's child has now completed His amazing ministry of teaching, healing, doing good, and revealing the nature and character of God. Nevertheless, He has been subjected to a kangaroo court, judged guilty of blasphemy, and crucified on a cross between two thieves. But He has also risen from the dead, appeared to some of His disciples, and then ascended to the Father before the very eyes of those disciples.

From the Mount of Olives these disciples return to Jerusalem and about 120 individuals gather in an Upper Room there—perhaps the same place where Jesus had met with His disciples just a few weeks before. In Acts 1:14 we read, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

I would imagine Mary had a number of things to pray about—the void in her life, her emotional pain, whatever role God would want her to assume in the early church; as well as the important event that was about to take place, namely the coming of the Holy Spirit. I'm also certain that she prayed with thanksgiving, because her other sons, mentioned here in verse 14, have apparently only recently begun to believe, perhaps in response to the resurrection of Jesus. She must be delighted to have them by her side there in the Upper Room.

The really important thing here is that we find Mary going to the right source for the comfort needed to heal her broken heart. Some people turn to alcohol, others to busyness. Some drown in depression, and still others dedicate themselves to revenge. The only avenue to complete healing is to find in God the peace that passes all understanding. The principal way we access that peace, just as Mary did, is through prayer.

Conclusion: This morning we have seen Mary, the Mother of our Lord, as a spiritual example to all of us. She was a woman of purity, submission, worship, meditation and prayer. The choice of her to be God's special instrument was not merely circumstantial and it was anything but a mistake! Mary's cousin Elizabeth has said it best about Mary: "Blessed are you among women," or as it can be legitimately translated, "Blessed are you above all other women." Protestants make a big deal about some of the remarkable women of Scripture—Ruth, Esther, Priscilla, another Mary who sat at Jesus' feet, and even Mary Magdalen. Our lack of emphasis on Mary, the mother of Jesus, is both tragic and just plain wrong.

But while acknowledging Mary's greatness, let's not forget that she recognized her need for the grace of God in her own life. If a godly woman like Mary needed a Savior, how much more do each of us need Him. We all need salvation because we all have a sin problem. We are estranged from God and disobedient to His commands. Furthermore, the Scriptures directly state that the wages of sin is death.

However, God solved our sin problem by sending His Son Jesus to this earth, to become one of us and then to offer His life as payment for our sins. In the words of John 1:12, “to all who receive Him, to those who believed in his name,” God gives the privilege of becoming His children. Have you received Jesus by faith? Have you acknowledged that His death, and His death alone, provides forgiveness for our sins? For everyone who has, together we can echo the words of the Apostle Paul, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15).