

Forward in Faith
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The story of Christmas is the greatest ever told. It's the story of the all-powerful Creator of the Universe coming down to earth and taking the form of an infant human in order to save the world. I love this story and today we are beginning a sermon series called Forward in Faith which will be based on the Christmas story.

The people in this story all took incredible risks and demonstrated great faith in God. Today we are going to look at how Mary and Joseph moved forward in faith. Luke 1:26-38 says:

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 done to me according to your word."

Mary teaches us that anyone can be used by God. was a teenager from an obscure village in the middle of nowhere, but God chose her. We don't know exactly why God chose her, but we do know she was a woman of faith. The first thing we learn from her is:

1- To move forward in faith we must believe the word of the Lord.

The angel's message was that Mary was about to become pregnant by supernatural means. Make sure you understand the situation here. Mary was a virgin. She was engaged to be married to Joseph. This must have been a wonderful time as they were making preparations for their wedding. But the angel's announcement threw their wedding plans into chaos.

Listen, a word from God does not always fit comfortably with our plans! In fact, a word from God sometimes throws those plans into disarray!

Mary now had to tell Joseph and her parents that she was pregnant – and not only that – she was still a virgin. Oh yeah – and by the way, God’s the father of this baby. Yeah, right.

As an unwed mother, Mary faced the possibility of rejection by Joseph, her own family and the community. But Mary trusted in the word of the Lord that promised she would never be alone. Even if everyone turned on her - the Lord would be with her. And that was true because God sent an angel to Joseph to convince him that Mary’s child was the Messiah. God was truly with her.

In a similar way, all of us who follow Jesus are never alone. God’s promised that He will never leave us or forsake us. God will never send you to do something for Him without providing whatever you need to do it. So, you can trust Him.

When we need faith what we really need is a word from God. Romans 10:17 says:

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

That’s what gave Mary faith – she had heard from God. You see Mary got 3 basic words from the Lord:

You will have a baby –

God will be with you –

Nothing is impossible with God

That’s all she needed – the word of the Lord – the promise of God: “You’re about to go through a difficult time, but I’m the God of the impossible and I’ll be with you the whole way.”

That’s the same promise we have from God when we go through hard times. I’m the God of the impossible and I’ll be with you all the time.

Thank God for that promise! The angel told Mary her son would be the Son of the Most High. And He would fulfill God’s promise to send Israel a Messiah, the One who would forever occupy the office of King of Israel.

All that was good news, but first, Mary wanted to understand how she could possibly get pregnant! So she asked for an explanation. Luke 1:34-35 says:

“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.”

The second thing we learn from this story is that:

2- To move forward in faith we must overcome doubts and fears.

We know Joseph and Mary had some fear because one of the first things the

angel said to both of them was, "Don't be afraid." Mary and Joseph had every right to be afraid. Their lives are falling apart. For years their life was a nightmare.

The key for Mary and Joseph was not to be absent of fear but to be full of faith. They also had to face their doubts. When the angel told Mary she would have a child, Luke 1:34 says:

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

Some translations say, "How can this be?" as if Mary was doubting. That's not what she said. The UBS New Testament Handbook says that the literal translation of this verse is 'How will this be.'

Mary did not say in unbelief, "How can this happen." She believed it would happen, she just did not know how. So she asked, "How will this be?" How can a virgin give birth to a child? So Gabriel explained that she would become pregnant through the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit.

But the angel did not rebuke Mary, as he had rebuked her uncle Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He was a priest who went into the Holy Place to light incense. While there, an angel appeared to him and told him he would have a son. Luke 1:18-20 says:

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

And they did, but notice that Zechariah did not believe the angel. He asked, How can I be sure? NAS says - How will I know this for certain? Message Version says - "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

Mary had questions about how God's word would be fulfilled, but Zachariah had unbelief. That's why Mary received an explanation and Zechariah received a rebuke.

I want you to know there's a difference between doubt and unbelief. An unbelieving person does not believe what they have been told. A doubter believes, but has questions about how it will happen.

Mary's question was not one of unbelief! She believed what she was told. Mary was full of faith, she just had questions about how the pregnancy would happen. She didn't even ask for some kind of confirmation, as Zechariah had. She simply didn't understand how she could possibly become pregnant.

Some people believe it is wrong to ever question God or have any doubts. But all of us face doubts at times. We all have questions like:
 Why didn't God answer my prayer?
 Can I really be a Christian and still have unanswered questions?
 "Why did my loved one die?" Or "Why am I still single?"
 Or "Why did she get the promotion, God. I worked twice as hard?"
 What do you do when you have questions you can't answer?

People tend to hide these hard questions. But God does not forbid questions. Joseph and Mary had questions. In fact, the Bible is full of people who asked questions.

Since when are questions bad? Since when is it wrong to admit that we don't understand everything? Since when is it wrong to ask God to clarify something?

Now, this is very important: there's a difference between asking God questions and questioning God! Asking God for clarification is one thing, but questioning His character or His motives or His decisions is something else.

It's one thing to ask questions in faith – it's another to question God in unbelief. There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt asks sincere questions, but unbelief is unwilling to hear the answers.

Unbelief is sin. Deliberate denial, disobedience, rebellion and it is always condemned in the Bible. But having doubts and questions is not sin.

So, what is doubt? It's the state of being sure of something, but unsure or uncertain of how or when it will happen. Like Mary, we can receive words from God that we do not understand. So, what do I do? Have faith. Faith is choosing to believe God's word in spite of our doubts. I can trust in God while at the same time deal with difficult questions.

But let me clue you in, we all have doubts at times – even in our faith. We're like the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9. Jesus told him that all things are possible to those who believe. Verse 24 says:

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

Don't you feel that way at times? You see, there are some things we will never understand. The Bible addresses this in Isaiah 55:8-9:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts."

We don't have to understand everything – in fact we can't.

We don't have to have all the answers – in fact we won't.

That's why it's called faith. The bottom line is trust. We need to trust in God who understands everything, who has all the answers and who makes everything come out right. That's what Joseph had to do. Matthew 1:18-25 says:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins..." When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called His name Jesus."

Think of what Joseph went through before this angel spoke to him. I'm sure he was shocked, disappointed and angry about Mary being pregnant. He was devastated. All his plans for the future fell apart. No one would have blamed Joseph if he had quietly dissolved his relationship with Mary upon finding out she was pregnant with a baby who wasn't his.

But Joseph was not just a man of integrity, he was a man of faith. When the angel visited him, he trusted God and obeyed God by taking on the role of being the earthly father of Jesus.

3- To move forward in faith we must obey God whatever the cost.

When God told Mary she would bear a child – she instantly obeyed.
When God told Joseph to take Mary as his wife – he instantly obeyed.

But, I want you to think about this. God told Mary in advance about her becoming pregnant. She had advance warning. But God let Joseph struggle with this horrific news before He explained in in a dream.

Joseph experienced the pain of betrayal and the grief of the death of his dream of being married to Mary. Why didn't God clear this up with Joseph before he went through the pain? In short, we don't know. The Bible doesn't say.

Sometimes God explains things in advance and sometimes He explains later and sometimes we get no explanation.

God does not handle every situation the same way with every person. We cause ourselves much pain if we compare ourselves with others and expect God to do for us what He did for them.

To move forward is faith we must believe that God is sovereign, God is wise, God is good, and God does what is best for all of us.

God's plan for your life will always require faith.
 You will never get enough revelation that you no longer need faith!
 You will always have to walk by faith not by sight.

Faith is believing in something that is beyond our ability to fully comprehend.
 The whole story of Joseph and Mary is a story of faith.
 From their story we learn that:
 We move forward in faith by believing the word of God.
 We move forward in faith by trusting God even when the outcome seems unsure.
 We move forward in faith by obeying God whatever the cost.

That's what God is looking for from each of us – a willingness to obey Him even when we don't understand and even when it's hard.

In fact, sometimes obedience must come before understanding.
 John 7:17 says:

If any man desires to do God's will, he will know (have the needed illumination to recognize, and can tell for himself) whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking from Myself...

Notice that obeying came before the knowing. When we obey the teachings of Christ, greater understanding will come.

This is what it means to walk by faith, not by sight. It means to trust God and obey Him – even when we don't understand, even when we doubt.

For example – you may say –
 I'm not so sure about this expressive praise and worship – but, I see it in the word, so I'm going to sing and shout and lift my hands anyway.

I'm not so sure about giving or tithing, but Jesus said it's more blessed to give than receive – so I'm going to give out of obedience.

I believe you will find that the truths of the Bible will have positive results in your life when you obey them.

Are you obeying the will Of God?
 Don't let fear dictate your faith or obedience!
 Fear didn't stop Mary and Joseph's obedience.
 Fear doesn't have to stop you either.
 But you must follow God's Plan, Not Your Own Plan!
 Mary and Joseph were both thrown a curve ball. Their response?
 They followed what God said.

They decided to abandon their plan and follow God's even though it was risky.
And I doubt they ever regretted that decision.

For us today I believe the same is true.
I believe God has something incredible planned for you.
But you have to abandon your safe plans to embrace God's plan for you.
But if you follow God's plan, I doubt you will ever regret it.

The story of Mary and Joseph shows us how to trust God even when his plans don't make sense.

From a human perspective the whole thing didn't make sense.

But Mary and Joseph displayed faith anyway.

They struggled to understand God's plan, but they trusted Him anyway!

Sometimes God asks us to do things that will not make sense.

In those moments we need to be like Mary and Joseph and keep moving forward in faith!

So – how do we move forward in faith?

We trust the word of the Lord

We use faith in God to overcome our doubts

We obey no matter what it costs

So, when you don't understand, keep moving forward in faith!

When you want to give up, keep moving forward in faith!

When life doesn't make sense, keep moving forward in faith!

When you're struggling with hard questions, keep moving forward in faith!

If God has told you to do something, do it because the cost of disobedience is higher than the cost of obedience!

If God has told you to do something – you don't have to understand it!

If God has told you to do something – don't try to fit it into your plans, but instead change your plans for His!

If God has told you to do something – you can do it – so do it now!

When you believe God's word – when you trust God no matter what – when you obey God whatever the cost - you will move forward in faith!