

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church

By Chris Fillingham

“Mary’s Body”

Luke 1:26-38

December 9, 2018

It’s Week Two in this series of the “Characters of Christmas.” Last week, we heard a beautiful sermon on Elizabeth from Pastor Donna Watts. And today, we have Mary’s story. “Gentle Mary.” ... “virgin Mary, meek and mild” ... as our Christmas carols put it.

And there’s a lot that has been made of that image of Mary, the “holy virgin” in the history of the church... a lot that I think we’ve projected onto the story that isn’t really there...

and some that has missed the deep gifts of Mary’s story for us all...

Truth is, there’s not a lot we know about Mary. We know more about Elizabeth’s background than Mary’s. Elizabeth, we’re told, comes from the priestly line of Aaron. But we don’t know what family Mary comes from, or what her parents did for a living, or who her grandparents were. All we know is that she is a random peasant girl...

from the middle of nowhere Galilee... a dusty village called Nazareth.

I tend to think of Nazareth as being like one of the small towns in the middle of nowhere Missouri.

Maybe like *Stanberry*, up in Northwest Missouri where Brad Summa grew up.

Or *Gilman City*, where Luke Crump grew up.

The only reason I even know those towns exist is because Brad and Luke are from there.

That’s kind of how Nazareth was... You wouldn’t know a thing about it, if it weren’t for the fact that Mary happened to be from there... and Jesus grew up there.

All that to say, Mary is kind of a nobody from nowhere. No important family heritage. Not an important place.

We have had a tendency to turn her into a heavenly queen, but she’s about as ordinary and non-descript as a person can be... which I think also... makes her about as universal as she can be.

Or to put it another way, because Mary is a nobody in particular, she is a picture, an image... of everybody in particular.

And to this nobody, who is a symbol of everybody... an angel comes and says, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you! ...Do not be afraid. You have found favor

with God... and you will conceive a divine child... when the Spirit of God comes on you... and the divine presence overshadows you..."

This message to Mary... is also a message to us all.

It's a message to the life of humanity....and it's a message to each person in particular.

It's a message to your distant cousin you don't think much about...
and even a message to you.

"Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you... You have found favor with God... and in your body, the divine life will grow... when the spirit of God overshadows you."

Now, I know what you're probably thinking... because it's so ingrained in us. "No, Pastor Chris, this isn't about us. This is about the holy virgin." Well, yes, it is about Mary... but that "holy virgin" part is where I think our great Christian family has gone a bit astray.

You see, we have had a hard time believing that the holy presence of God could come into our ordinary bodies... or be joined with our everyday, ordinary human flesh... or come from a regular womb with its monthly cycle. "No," the thinking goes, "Mary... must have been quite different from the rest of us."

So, we've taken her virginity as a symbol of some special purity she must have had to house the life of God. But that's not in the scriptures.

In fact, I think the story Luke tells, hints at something quite different. He tells Mary's story in the shadow of Elizabeth's story... a barren womb being filled with life.

And if you know your Old Testament, you know that Elizabeth's story is a kind of story telling pattern that repeats itself. Right?

It seems like just about every time God is going to do something special, every time God is going to bring salvation of some kind or another, it starts with a barren womb that becomes filled with life.

Sara was barren... until she had Isaac.

Then Isaac's wife, Rebecka was barren.... until she had Jacob and Esau.

Then Jacob's wife Rachel was barren... until she had Joseph.

See the pattern?

And it doesn't stop there.

Samson's mom was barren... until she conceived Samson

Hannah was barren ... until she conceived Samuel...

And now we get to the New Testament... and this time it starts out with **two wombs** that should not have life in them... being filled with life. There's really no better way to bring the story of God's salvation to a climax, is there?

You see, the barren to pregnant pattern isn't really about a woman getting to have a child that she always wanted... because the honest truth is, not all barren women do.

On a deeper level, it's ***about life showing up where it seemed like it could not be.***

Life bursting forward in ways that we cannot believe.

It's really about divine life coming into our very ordinary, seemingly empty bodies.

And it's into this pattern that Mary's story unfolds. So, I don't think the point of her virginity was some kind of special purity... it was rather that her body...

like Elizabeth, Hannah, Rachel, Rebekka, and Sara's body...

would have been thought of as pretty empty...

without anything special going on.

And truth be told... this is really how most of us see our bodies... isn't it? ***Empty... with nothing holy going on.***

It doesn't matter much whether you're a woman or a man... whether you've had children or not... most of us see our bodies... as empty of any kind of holiness or divine life.

No matter what the biblical story may suggest...

and no matter what the angel from God may say...

we just can't get past the messages that our bodies are somehow unholy... or unworthy... or maybe even... dirty.

And so... along the way... the church decided that message to Mary couldn't be a message to us all. No, Mary must be quite different than the rest of us.

In fact, we kept stretching it to make her difference more and more... so that we started teaching that Mary stayed a virgin her whole life.

"She and Joseph never consummated their marriage..." the teaching goes...despite the fact that the scriptures suggest otherwise... and despite the fact the gospels talk about Jesus' siblings.

But we just needed Mary to be different... her body, her flesh, different from our flesh.

We needed Mary's body to be virgin-pure in order to handle our own shame around our dirty and deformed, unholy bodies.

After all, if God's presence were going to come into a human body, it could not come into flesh like mine, right?

For Mary's body to have received the divine life... she must have stayed a virgin, ee taught...

But even that wasn't enough.

So, another doctrine was developed in the Christian household... that not only was Mary a virgin... no, her purity was more than that.

We began to teach that ***she was sinless***... in fact, unlike the rest of us, she wasn't infected with the sin of Adam when her parents did the dirty deed to conceive her. No, she was "***immaculately conceived***..." the doctrine goes... and remained undefiled by sin her entire life.

After all... if sin were in her body... then that's just a little too much like us, and the one thing we know is that our bodies... are unholy. Right?

In other words... we simply could not accept that the message from the angel was to a nobody girl from nowhere... because it might just mean that it was a message to everybody, everywhere.

It might just mean that the angel's good news... was saying something about us all... about your life and my life... your body and my body.

"Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you... You have found favor with God... and your body will conceive divine life... when the Spirit comes on you and the power of God overshadows you."

Nah... that can't be. Not for us.

So, we have turned the meaning of Mary's story upside down and emptied out all of its power and implications for our own lives.

But what if we hadn't?

What might change if this Advent morning, we turn her story right side up... and put the power back in... and begin to see... that

The point of Mary's virginity, is not purity... but possibility.

A possibility that exists in men and women... boys and girls... the possibility that your fleshy body that seems empty... is actually holy.

That your body may just be infused with God's own life.

“How can this be?” you ask. Of course, you do. That’s what Mary wondered too. “How can this be?” Well, this is what happens when the Spirit of God comes upon us... and the power of God overshadows us...

And that is exactly what happened in the **incarnation**.

You know, the incarnation didn’t just happen to Mary. It happened to humanity... to us all.

Mary’s body is infused with the life of God... and Jesus is conceived...

And it was said in the early church that in that moment, in the incarnation:

“The whole of God entered into the whole of humanity.”

“God became one with us, that we might become one with God.”

*“God became a child of a human,
that we might become children of God.”*

It didn’t just happen to Mary.

The entire body of humanity is infused with the divine life.

That’s hard to wrap our minds around, isn’t it? So, I was thinking about how to imagine it this week and the first thing that came to mind... was a turkey.

Jessi and I had one of our close family friends over for Thanksgiving this year. They offered to bring a turkey and deep fry it, to which, of course, we said, “Yes!”

I had never had a deep-fried turkey, so I was interested to see how it was done.

Now you all that are experienced cooks won’t be surprised by this, but I was fascinated when our friends pulled out a large syringe next to the raw fleshy turkey sitting on our counter.

Apparently, it was filled with butter and Cajun seasoning.

And then, he went about methodically injecting each muscle with this seasoning... and I could see the turkey’s body swelling...

**And that... is at least a little hint of what happens to Mary’s body...
that happened to us all in the incarnation.**

The life of God, the seasoning of God, is injected into humanity’s body.

But if turkeys aren’t your thing... how about **bath time?**

This last year we were given colored bath drops for the kids’ baths. It’s a jar of Crayola bath tablets. Each tablet is either red, yellow, or blue.

And as you fill up the bathtub, you can drop one of these tablets in there... and when you do, it's like dropping Alka-Seltzer into a cup. The color begins to stream off this tablet... and it swirls and spreads in the water like a cloud of dye... The tablet infuses the ordinary bath water... and ***every drop of that water takes on its color.***

That is what happened when an angel shows up to an ordinary peasant girl whose body is as ordinary as yours and mine. The life of God is dropped into human flesh...
and it swirls and spreads
like a cloud of color in the water of creation.
Every drop takes on its color.

In the incarnation, the life of God infuses creation!

I know that is hard to grasp.
And it's hard to believe... especially about our fleshy bodies.
It's why the church has pushed it away and turned its meaning upside down. But I promise you, it's true.

Your flesh, is holy flesh.
Your skin, is sacred skin.
God comes to you in your body and speaks to you through you both.

And if we can just grasp this Christmas-good-news, it might just change our lives in some pretty profound ways... because it might just mean that caring for your body and loving your body...
is a holy calling.
It is part of loving the body of Christ.

And if that's true, then it also means other bodies...
dirty bodies and illegal bodies...
and pasty white bodies and chocolate brown bodies... are also holy... and caring for them is also part of loving the body of Christ.

And it also might mean that the desires of your body aren't evil in and of themselves. The desires of your body come from a holy energy.

Sure... when we don't hone those desires to their sacred purpose, they can create a mess in our lives... but Christ didn't come to get rid of your desires... but to redeem them.

At the root of the desires in each of your five senses is something holy stirring in you.

Who knows, it may just be the Holy Spirit coming on you...

It might just be the divine presence in your flesh... reaching out to the divine presence in the flesh of creation all around you---

In the sacred goodness of food and drink...

Of nature and animals,

Of friends and lovers.

At the root of the desires in each of your five senses is something holy stirring in you.

Bonaventure, an ancient Franciscan, taught that our five senses, the outward senses of our body, are directly connected to the inner sense of our soul... the energy of our souls.

Think about that for a moment. The five senses... the sensuality of your body... is a gateway to the energy of the soul...

What we see and touch, hear and smell, taste and breathe... can... all become expressions of God's love to you.

I love the way A J Scott put it. I want to share this with you because it has become dear to me in the last 6 months. He says,

"Through sun, moon, and stars,

through the earth and sea... trees and flowers,

through the bodies of men and women,

the looks of human countenances, and the tones of human voices...

[It is through these, that God's soul is being expressed to our soul,

and we may express our soul to God.]"¹

[repeat?]

So, this Advent season, allow Mary to become your kindred friend. Let her teach you that the life of God has infused the life of the world... just like those color droplets in the bathtub.

Let her help you come to know that the energies of your body come from a holy place.

Let her show you that the Spirit of God is overshadowing you...

pumping through your veins... and flowing out to your fingertips.

¹ A. J. Scott quoted by John Phillip Newell, lecture, Iona, Scotland, May 2018.

And it's OK if it's hard for you to imagine.

Jesus knew it would be hard for us to believe... and he knew it would be easy for us to forget.

So... he left us this table... and invited us to remember it every time we gathered around the table.

... to remember that matter and spirit has been joined.

... that time and eternity has become one.

"This bread is my body.

"This cup is my blood... my life."

I'm going to ask my servers to come forward now as we prepare to receive this gift again.