

# *From Darkness to Light*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

1<sup>st</sup> Weekend of Advent

December 2, 2012

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*Isaiah 9:2, 6–7 (NIV)*

<sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

<sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

*Jeremiah 33:14–16 (NIV)*

<sup>14</sup>“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

<sup>15</sup>“In those days and at that time  
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;  
he will do what is just and right in the land.

<sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved  
and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called:  
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

*Luke 1:26–33 (NIV)*

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

*God called his people to leave the darkness and walk into the light, to a Savior, a Wonderful Counselor, a Prince of Peace, born to a woman from Nazareth.*

We've all seen the cartoon. A lone figure with bushy hair, a scraggly beard, dressed in rags standing on a street corner holding a sign reading, “Repent! The end is near!” This political season, I've heard more than few speeches referred to as “jeremiads” meaning a list of woes and complaints often delivered in a tirade. And yes, it is a reference to Jeremiah. It isn't really unfair because Jeremiah was given the weighty task of telling God's people that the end was upon them, that they were headed over the cliff. They had passed the point of return; there was nothing that would forestall the looming disaster. And it all came to be. The Babylonians rolled over Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. There was no darker moment in Israel's history.

But sadly, all we often hear about is Jeremiah the so-called prophet of doom and gloom; never, Jeremiah the prophet of hope. In the depth of Israel's despair, as they

anticipated rebuilding shattered lives a thousand miles from home, as they tried to hang on to one another and to the LORD God, Jeremiah brought them a message of hope, of promises kept, of a new covenant.

This new covenant would represent the movement from darkness into light, as Isaiah had so poetically expressed it. Yet, reading the OT prophets can be pretty difficult. One of the problems is that they seem to talk about future events as if they had already happened! Look at Isaiah 9:6-7, “a child *has been* born . . . a son *given* . . . he *is* named . . . he *will* establish.” Past, present, and future – it’s all here!

The prophets understood that God’s promises were not possibilities, they were certainties. With God, a promise made is a promise that has already been kept. God speaks and things simply . . . are. Even as the Jews lived in exile, Jeremiah knew that God had spoken the new covenant into existence.

Thus, when the Israelites faced dark times, the prophets would paint word-pictures of the light that lay ahead. The exact shape of the light might not have been always clear, but the truth of God’s light, his commitment to his promises, was always there . . . like a light at the end of the tunnel.

Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of a promised child entrusted with the authority of God who would usher in God’s kingdom, the time when God would reign over the affairs of all people with justice and righteousness. In that time, God would again be with his people as he once had been with them in the Garden of Eden. Hence, one name given the child is Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), which means “God-with-us” in Hebrew. This child was and is and will be “Wonderful Counselor . . . Mighty God . . . Prince of Peace.” And this child, this “son of the Most High,” would be born to a young woman, a girl really, from a small Jewish village, far from Jerusalem.

#### *Mary and an angel named Gabriel*

Imagine that you are a farmer or a homemaker in Galilee more than 2000 years ago. You are Jewish. You worship the LORD God and you tend to your own business. You pay your taxes to the Romans and stay out of the way when their patrols come through your village. All in all, you and your family lead a pretty good life. But . . . deep within your heart there burns a fire, a shining hope -- the hope of Israel. . . . You know and cherish the stories about God and Israel as told in the Hebrew scriptures. Long ago, Israel had a king . . . but no more. Long ago, God himself had dwelt with his people . . . but no more. Long ago, God’s promises had seemed so certain and so near . . . but no more. Though your ancestors had returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians, you know that the exile never really ended. For more than 500 years, your people have endured one oppressor after another. The sins of Israel have not been forgiven. God’s promises have not been kept. Deep in your heart, you know that you and all Israel are captive still. . . . So you hope and wait and *look*, perhaps not so patiently, for God’s anointed one, the returning king, the Messiah who would usher in God’s kingdom. On that day, the Day of the Lord, the sins of Israel would be forgiven and the exile would be ended. Once again, God would be with you and all his people.

This was Mary’s life, her world. She was a young woman when we first meet her, perhaps thirteen or so, from the village of Nazareth, which lies several miles to the west of the Sea of Galilee. It was an inconsequential place filled with inconsequential people. Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph. Her engagement to Joseph was completely binding, so much so that if Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would be considered a widow.

One day, just an ordinary day we can be sure, Mary was visited by an angel, one of God’s messengers, for that is what “angel” means. This angel gives his name, Gabriel,

and proceeds to tell this uneducated, rural girl that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, probably even fearful. But Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her. Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" and she is to name this baby, "Jesus."

### *The Name of Jesus*

Though we often take names for granted (what are the popular baby names this year?!), in the Bible, names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. God's revealing of his name to Moses was a momentous event in the story of the exodus (Exodus 3:13-15).

Sometimes, God would even change a person's name to convey a new meaning, such as changing Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5). And Mary is told that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

The name, "Jesus/Joshua/Yeshua," was a very ordinary name in Jesus' day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called "the Son of the Most High," a striking title, and that he will sit on David's throne, where he will reign over God's people (the "House of Jacob") forever. Indeed, Jesus' "kingdom will have no end." Luke could not be more clear. This baby to be born to Mary and named Jesus is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

With all this, it is rather astonishing how little attention many Protestants pay to Mary. Other than her place of honor in the annual Christmas pageant, Mary is largely ignored by many Christians. Part of this is Protestant reaction against the extreme Roman Catholic veneration of Mary.<sup>1</sup> Part of it may be simple neglect. Regardless, it is time for us to recover our appreciation for and understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary while avoiding the extremes.

### *Birth, Life, Death . . . Resurrection*

Of all the people who crossed paths with Jesus during the course of his life on earth, only his mother, Mary, was with Jesus each step of the way. In the Gospels and Acts, Mary appears at key points in Jesus' life. Of course, as wonderfully told by Luke, Mary's story begins with God's choice of her to be Jesus' mother (Luke 1:27-56; 2:1-40).

Despite being unmarried and thirteen or so, when God calls Mary she responds in faith and obedience. Martin Luther wrote that Mary is the embodiment of God's grace; a grace that enables faith. In an essay, Timothy George wrote, "Mary was a disciple of Christ *before* she was his mother . . . She is called blessed not because of her virginity or even her humility, but because she was chosen as the person and place where God's glory would enter most deeply into the human story."<sup>2</sup>

In the one Gospel story from Jesus' youth, Mary upbraids him for abandoning the family in Jerusalem when he went to the temple alone (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus was respectful to his mother, but his words must have cut right into her heart. Jesus' first public miracle results from Mary's insistence that Jesus help out at a wedding feast (John 2:1-5). Later, perhaps fearing that Jesus had lost his mind, Mary seeks to protect

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<sup>1</sup>In recent years growing numbers of Catholics have petitioned the Pope to declare Mary, Co-Redeemer with Christ! Certainly, the Pope is unlikely ever to equate Mary with Jesus or undercut Jesus' uniqueness as the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Still, the effort illustrates the extremes in devotion to Mary that are possible.

<sup>2</sup>from "The Blessed Evangelical Mary," in *Christianity Today*, December 2003. Professor George is an historian and Dean of the Divinity School at Samford University.

him from the crowds (Mark 3:20-35), only to hear Jesus redefine his family as those who do God's will. Only a parent could fully appreciate the hurt Mary must have felt. These three episodes illustrate that being Jesus' mother must have been difficult at times – long before Mary had to confront her son's horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

At Jesus' crucifixion, when the crowds have all left, Mary is still there, with John and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25-27). While hanging on the cross, Jesus commends his mother to John's care. By doing so, Jesus ensures that not only will his mother not be left destitute and alone, but that she will also be explicitly welcomed into the new family that Jesus has created. She stays with the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension and is with them in Jerusalem as they all await the arrival of the promised Helper and Comforter (Acts 1:12-14).

### The Incarnation

Our word "incarnate" comes from a Latin word meaning "be made flesh." ("Carnivorous" is based on the same Latin root.) Thus, when we refer to the incarnation or to "God incarnate," we are referring to "God made flesh" . . . God becoming human.

The early church had a word they used to describe Mary that is helpful here: *theotokos*, "the one who gave birth to the one who is Christ. We sometimes think that the point of the Virgin Birth is to emphasize Jesus' divinity. It is not. The early church embraced the teachings about the Virgin Birth because it emphasized Jesus' humanity! An early Christian heretic named Marcion very much believed that Jesus was God. But he couldn't bring himself to see Jesus as truly human, saying, "Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes." All the messiness of childbirth was too much for Marcion. But that very messiness drives home our proclamation that God has experienced life as we experience it. He has celebrated as we celebrate, suffered as we suffer, and perhaps most astounding of all, God has shared in our fears.

### *The Serene Contradiction*

Kathleen Norris speaks of Mary as a "serene contradiction." Norris writes, "I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are supposed to believe about her. And she doesn't make it easy. . . . The point about Mary is that she is [many] things, and more, always more. She is poor yet gloriously rich. She is blessed among women yet condemned to witness her son's execution. She is human yet God-bearer, and the Word that she willingly bears is destined to pierce her soul. Had we a more elastic imagination, we might be less troubled by Mary's air of serene contradiction."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the place for us to begin recovering our appreciation of Mary is to see in her a magnificent model of total trustful devotion to God. When an angel comes to her, announcing that God has chosen her, Mary's reply is simple: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Mary responds to God with trusting obedience, knowing the "real-world" consequences of an unmarried pregnancy. Her devotion to her son would endure all the way to his crucifixion and death. Mel Gibson's portrait of Mary's devotion in *The Passion of the Christ* is free of any concerns about doctrine or contradictions. Instead, we see Mary's steadfast, enduring love of Jesus. Christ may have been abandoned, even by Peter, but Mary stayed true. The faith of all was preserved in this one person, this Blessed Mother.

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<sup>3</sup>from "The Serene Contradiction of the Mother of Jesus." This is Norris' foreword to *The Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* by Gaventa and Rigby.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The biblical use of light and darkness works on many levels. What is the darkness in your own life? Perhaps it is a health problem of a loved one or even yourself. Perhaps it is an addiction that threatens your life and your loved ones. Perhaps your darkness is a growing sense that the priorities in your life are messed up. How are you dealing with the “darkness” of an economic recession? What are you learning about your own faith? Perhaps you are coming to realize that you go days without ever even thinking of God. How does Jesus and the Good News about Jesus bring light to this darkness?
2. Luke tells us that Mary was “favored” by God. But Alan Culpepper points out that being favored meant that Mary would become pregnant and bear a child out of wedlock – a child destined to die a shameful and horrible death on a Roman cross. You can bet that many of Mary’s townspeople weren’t very understanding of her condition! I suspect that God’s favor towards us might not always conform to what we think favor ought to look like. Mary was called to be obedient and she obeyed. We are called to be obedient. Do we obey? Do we see the power that lies in being obedient to God? Does our obedience ever cost us anything? Do we think that God’s favor – God’s grace! – comes cheaply?

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#### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

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### Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The class is often led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

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## Sermon Notes

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