

Today we're blessed to have our Sunday School children's Christmas service. Jesus himself pointed to children as beautiful examples for us. He once said, "*I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 18:3). What makes children special in God's eyes? Is it their great accomplishments? No. It is because they are perfect? No. What makes children special? They believe Jesus' promises. Like Mary. Even if it were true that she remained a virgin forever, even if it were true that she ascended into heaven without dying, even if it were true that she appeared to this Juan Diego guy in Mexico, none of those "great things" could possibly make her more special than the fact that God chose her, and she believed in God's promise.

Because this is the greatest Christmas preparation possible: Believe God's promises. "*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you*" (Luke 2:11). "May it be to me as you have said." "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests*" (Luke 2:14). "May it be to me as you have said." "*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, 'God with us'*" (Matthew 1:23). "May it be to me as you have said." Christmas is not about what you do. Life is not about what you do. It's about what God has done. Jesus was born for you. "May it be to me as you have said." Believe it!

Luke 1:26-38
Pastor Nathan Nass

Advent 4
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²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He 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, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The 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. ³⁶Even 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. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Preparing for Christmas: Believe!

Today's a great day to talk about Mary. First, Christmas is just a week away. Can you believe it? Second, the biggest day of the year for Mary just took place. You know what this past Monday, December 12th was, right? Maybe not. It's the most important day of the year in Mexico—the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. It's said that on December 12, 1531, the Virgin Mary appeared to a shepherd named Juan Diego in Mexico. To prove it, she left her image on Juan Diego's cloak. That image is called the "Virgin of Guadalupe." Now, December 12th is celebrated as the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This past Monday, over 7 million people visited the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City. So it's a great day to talk about Mary!

For good reason, lots of people think Mary was special. She was. She was Jesus' mother! In fact, some people believe that Mary's so special that they've thought of other great and grand things that Mary did to make her special. Do you know what those great things are? Some people have claimed that Mary wasn't just a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth, she was always a virgin. Others have claimed that Mary was so pure that she never sinned—that she herself was born without sin. Others believe that at the end of her life, Mary ascended into heaven without dying. The thinking is that since Mary did all these great things, Mary must be special!

It's just there's a problem: Those big and grand things aren't true! Mary wasn't always a virgin. The Bible repeatedly mentions Mary with Jesus' brothers. After Jesus was

born, she had other children, just like you would expect. Mary wasn't perfect. In fact, at one point she and Jesus' family tried to stop Jesus from preaching because they thought he was out of his mind! (Mark 3:21). If Mary ascended into heaven, the Bible certainly doesn't tell us about it. Lots of people believe that Mary was special because of all these grand things that she supposedly did. The problem is that she didn't do those great things. There must have been something else that made her special.

My goal today isn't to talk bad about Mary. I want to use her as an example of a lie that we constantly believe. We think that we have to do something special in order to be special. We think that we have to do something great in order to be great. Look at what we do with Mary: If Mary's going to be great, then we need to make her sinless, have her ascend into heaven, give her the power to answer prayers... If Mary's really great, then she had to do something great! If I'm going to be great, then I've got to do something great! I'm special based on what I do! Don't we have that idea ingrained in us? We spend our lives trying to do something special to be special.

We even see that at Christmastime. We've got this idea in our heads, "I'm special based on what I do." So, I've got to get that perfect present, so that they realize how special I am. Don't tell me that thought hasn't crossed your mind! I'm going to make the perfect food... I've got set up the perfect lights display... I'm going to be at church more than anyone else... I've got to preach the perfect Christmas sermon. Maybe you don't struggle with that last one—I do! What is the thought behind each of those thoughts? People are special if they do special things.

That might sound innocent enough, but that's a very dangerous thought. If you have to do something to earn God's love, whom are you trusting in? You! So people try to make Mary into "super Mary" who does all these great things. Then we try to make ourselves into "super me" who does all sorts of great things. Do you lie? The greater things I do, the more God will love me... If I want to be special, I have to do special things... Where do we end up? Seven million people traveling miles and miles to worship Mary. Why? Great people do great things.

Or do they? Let's look closely at the real story of Mary today. Out of the blue, the angel Gabriel appeared to her and said, "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*" There's so much we could talk about in this story! For today, I just want you to think about this: Why was Mary highly favored? What made her blessed? Was Mary a giver or a receiver of grace? That's pretty easy to answer. Mary was "*highly favored,*" because of all the women in Israel, God had chosen to bless her. At this point, what had Mary done? Nothing! She did nothing to earn God's blessing. No great things... But God chose her. God made Mary special. By grace.

Mary understood all this. I think she would be appalled at the worship she sometimes receives today. After hearing that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Savior, she sang a beautiful song—the Song of Mary. Here's one of the things that she said, "*For the*

Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name" (Luke 1:49). Who was doing something for whom? God was doing something for Mary! According to Mary, who is great? God is! Mary was really just echoing Gabriel's words. "*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great...*" You actually know the word for "great" in Greek. Can you guess what it is? It's *mega*. That's what it says! Jesus is going to be *mega*. Jesus is great.

Gabriel said, "*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*" I know the Bible's claim that Mary was a virgin sounds silly to many people today, but this is why the virgin birth is so important. If Mary and Joseph were to have a baby together, how would that baby be? Think of it this way: If two sinners have a child, what will that child be like? A sinner! If Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph, he would be just like you and me. Now, if we were to crucify you, would you take away the sin of the world? No! You would be dying for your own sins. If Jesus was just a human being, he couldn't be our Savior. But Joseph wasn't his father. God was. Sinful Mary + perfect God = perfect Jesus. The Son of God and the Son of Mary. Just the One we needed to save us! He's *mega*—great!

Just think of how all of this must have sounded to Mary, with no advance warning! "You are going to give birth to God's Son who will save the world." "Your Son will be the great One who rules the universe forever." "This is all going to come from you, by the power of the Holy Spirit." "You are highly favored, because of all the women in the world, God has chosen you to be Jesus' mother." If that sounds unbelievable today, imagine how it must have sounded to Mary. What would you have said?

Here's what Mary said, "*I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.*" Mary was special. There was no one like her. Do you want to know the absolutely amazing thing that made her special? She believed God's promise. That's the *amazing* thing that made her special. She believed God's promise. Some people once came to Jesus and asked, "*What must we do to do the works God requires?*" Jesus answered, "*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent*" (John 6:28-29). You can get it out of your head that to be special people we have to do special things. You, like Mary, are special because God has chosen you, and you believe God's promise: "*Nothing is impossible with God!*" I'm not great. You're not great. But Jesus is great!

And Mary's response is the definition of faith in Jesus. "*May it be to me as you have said...*" Faith is not me holding on to God. Faith is hearing God and saying, "Okay! May it be to me as you have said." So God promises that Jesus came and died and rose to take our sins away. What does faith say? "May it be to me as you have said." So God promises that there really is a heaven where all those who trust in Jesus will live forever. What does faith say? "May it be to me as you have said." So God promises that he loves you, that he has chosen you, purely by his grace. What does faith say? "May it be to me as you have said." You don't have to go out and *do* more. Respond like Mary responded. Believe!