

## Advent Meditation Week 4: The Fruit of Submission

**Tim Keller**

Let me read to you from Luke chapter 1. This is the Annunciation, very famous passage.

*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 conceive and give birth to a son, and you were to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants 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 unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

Now at Advent we look at the texts surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ and the main point of every single Christmas text is really the same. That the immortal Son of God descended into time and space so that this world, which is so wrong, could be made right, and our hearts, which are so broken, could be made whole. And that's the main point. Jesus Christ became a human being. The Son of God was incarnate in the flesh. And of course, that's the main point of every one of these texts.

However, it's also helpful sometimes, to take a look at the people who are receiving that message. So, there was Zechariah and Elizabeth, and there was Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the wise men, and there was Herod. And it's always instructive to take a look at the people who were actually receiving the message to see what we can learn from them. And so, let's take a look at Mary, and let's look at the three things she is being told. And then let's look at her response. I think we can learn a number of things from that.

First of all, the three things she's told —there's three amazing statements here. The first one is it says that you're going to have a son, and he will reign forever. And almost as if the angel knows that —this is almost unbelievable. I mean, it is unbelievable. He then repeats himself and says, His kingdom will never end. So that's the first astounding thing. What? I'm going to have a child and he's going to grow up to be a king. That's amazing enough. But his kingdom will never end.

The second thing, though, he says, which is even more stunning, is in response to what Mary says. Mary says, I'm going to have a son. She says, I'm a virgin. I don't have a husband. How can I get pregnant? And what the angel says to Mary is, well, for this pregnancy, you're not going to need a husband. You can imagine Mary looking at the angel and saying, what? Because what he says is, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

And then thirdly, and lastly, he says even the most astonishing thing, which is this person who is going to be born to you in this miraculous way is not just a holy person, but the Holy One. It says, so the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. This is God himself that's being born. There's lots of holy persons, but this isn't just another holy person. This is the Son of God himself. Now that's the message, and of course it's the message of Christmas.

But how does Mary respond? And that's what's so fascinating, I think, and so instructive. Let's take a look at two things. She responds with healthy doubt and thoughtful surrender. Healthy doubt and thoughtful surrender.

First of all, healthy doubt. You say, well, where's the doubt? When the angel says to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary," and so on, it says, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Now, the word wondered, the English word wondered, is not very helpful. It's translating a Greek word that actually means to take an audit. It's a rational word. And what it means is when the angel appeared and began speaking, she was very troubled and also, she was furiously trying to figure out what was going on. There's no naivete here.

There's a tendency for modern people to be marked by what C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery, almost as if everybody in ancient times had a lower IQ than we do today. Now that's just not true. Mary had the same kind of IQ that we have today. And notice she doesn't say, oh, like a gullible, ancient person. She doesn't say, oh, angels, it's great. I've always heard about angels. Tell me. No, she's troubled and she's thinking, Is this a hallucination? What's going on here? She's basically processing it just the way we would, the way you would. And it's quite wrong to think religious people are people who don't doubt. Skeptical people doubt and religious people don't doubt. But let's also notice something interesting here. When Zechariah, when his angel came and told him about the birth of John the Baptist, when Zechariah expressed doubt, the angel said, "Just for that, I'm not going to let you speak until the child is born." But here, Mary expresses some doubt, but there's nothing like that that happens. And what that means is the Bible's understanding of doubt is incredibly nuanced. This was healthy doubt. Or think of it like this: Some doubts, some doubting people are doubting because they don't want answers. That's why they're expressing their doubts. They just don't want, they want to keep the answers where they

don't want to hear any answers. But some people doubt because they actually want more answers. They really want the truth.

There is a tremendous tendency, unfortunately, on the part of a lot of secular people to think all doubt about God is good, that only smart people doubt God all the way through, all the time. And there's a lot of, I'm afraid, Christian people who think doubts are all bad. So, if a young person in high school youth group asks some pretty strong questions, there's a tendency to say, you, must have faith. You just have to, you can't ask questions you shouldn't doubt. But here is Mary, and she has healthy doubt. And it actually is very, very important as a way for us to get more and more truth and actually build up faith. That healthy doubt is a way to stronger faith. That's the first thing we learn.

The second thing, and the last thing, probably the most important thing, is you see a thoughtful surrender. Now, the reason it's thoughtful is because here's Mary, and she's asking the angel questions. She's not saying, oh, whatever you say. She's saying, Now, wait a minute. This doesn't work. I'm not married. She's troubled and she's wondering, remember she's thinking all this up. So, she's thinking about it and she knows what's going to happen. Even if she can convince Joseph of this astounding thing. People in small towns, they can add up and she will get pregnant and she will be pregnant and she will have a child before she ought to because she's going to get pregnant before she marries. And in a small town, she knows the rest of her life she's going to be seen as the mother of an illegitimate child. She knows how vulnerable this is going to make her. She knows all that, and yet she surrenders. And she says, I am your servant. And then she says, and I love the King James, "Let it be to me according to your word."

What is surrender? In spite of the fact that she was not a fool, she's not gullible, she's not some kind of naive person, she's thoughtful, she knows what she's getting into, she realizes what's going to happen, but at that point she takes her hands off her life. You know, when the angel says, you, shall call his name Jesus, Mary right away knew something was up. Because, you see, parents get to name their own children. Why? When you have a child, at least for many years, you are the authority. You name the child because you have the authority over the child. But right away, this child comes into her life and you don't name him, which means that when Jesus comes into your life, you're not the authority. He's the authority. He calls the shots. You have to take off your hands off your life. That means that you have to submit to him completely. It means doing whatever he says in his word, even if you don't agree with it. And it means accepting whatever he sends into your life providentially, even if you don't understand it. She took her hands off her life.

Now, how are we going to do that? This is very hard. How are you and I going to do that? Here's what I want you to see, though. There's a way for us to do it. But first, I want you to know that Mary is a better person than me. And Mary's a better person than you. You know

why? Because Mary did this before knowing what Jesus was going to do for her. She had no idea that whatever she was doing for Jesus, he was going to do infinitely more for her. When she took her hands off her life, it just meant a lot of misunderstanding, perhaps social opprobrium, maybe, you know, all sorts of problems that might come into her life. When he took his hands off his life, he came from heaven to earth. He became a servant. He knew he was going to experience rejection and torture and death. You see, he became vulnerable. In the Garden of Gethsemane, what did he say? I don't want to go through this. But he said, Father. I'm your servant. Let it be to me according to your word. He did that for us. And so that's where you get the power to do it for him. Mary didn't even know that, but look what she did. Oh, let us not fall lower in the test than this 15-year-old uneducated, unwed mother. Take your hands off your life. Give yourself completely to him.

Dorothy Sayer said. The incarnation means that for whatever reason God chose to let us be limited, to suffer, to be subject to sorrows and death, He has nonetheless had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. God can ask nothing from us that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation defeat, despair, and death. He was born in poverty, he died in disgrace, he suffered infinite pain, all for us, and he thought it well worth his while. Amen.

And now here's Tim and Kathy Keller for a short time of Q&A on today's meditation.

**Kathy Keller**

Like you, that's one of my favorite verses in the Bible where Mary says, Let it be unto me as you have said. And don't you think that in doing that and including that in the scriptural record, that's meant to be a template or a pattern for all Christians on how we respond when God asks us to do something, anything, to just say. Be it to me as you have said, no matter what? In doing that. Mary sort of prefigures the life of the church and the believers. I mean, there's that whole theme all the way through the Bible about Jesus as the bridegroom and the bride of Christ coming down out of heaven, et cetera.

**Tim Keller**

As they're all in a sense. Yeah, that we're like Mary.

**Kathy Keller**

That we're all like Mary. We're going to be the bride of Christ. Interestingly enough, a few years ago, I was in touch with Eowyn Jones-Stoddard, who, for anybody who knows who Ed Clowney is, that's his granddaughter, that's Eowyn. And she's a missionary with her husband in Europe. She's been working on a book and she's exploring the theme throughout all of Scripture about Jesus, who's the second Adam, is married to the church, who is the second

Eve. So, the church is the second Adam's second Eve. So that we as believers, I mean it's right in Romans 7 where it says we put ourselves in His arms and we bear fruit. When our husband was alive, we couldn't marry another, but now he's dead and we are married to Jesus, all that. And we're meant to bear fruit. So, I find that really helpful as a metaphor and as a theme through Scripture. But I wanted to know what you thought.

**Tim Keller**

No, actually that's a great insight and actually I. If I had one more time, I probably should have put it into the talk itself. Because Mary, when she surrenders to God, in a sense, she is, in a sense, the bride of God. And because she submits to God, Jesus is born. And therefore, salvation comes into the world. So, it's not just that she's submitting to him, it bears fruit. The submission bears fruit. And what that is saying to us is that whenever we surrender to God, there's always, in a sense, redemption happening as the fruit. At the very least, you are getting more sanctified. You are becoming more like Christ. Every single time you submit to His will, salvation is growing in you. That doesn't mean you become more saved in the sense of being forgiven, but you are becoming more saved in the sense of becoming more like Christ. But also, God does great things in other people's lives through you. And therefore, yes, that's right, that to submit to Him bears fruit. And just as, of course, Jesus Christ's submission to the Father brought infinite joy and bliss and glory and salvation of the world. It's a great point. And I really should have made it. And I'm very grateful. Kathy?

**Kathy Keller**

Yes?

**Tim Keller**

I'm grateful, Eve, that you helped Adam see what I probably should have included in the sermon anyway.

**Kathy Keller**

As you're talking, I'm trying to look up in James where it says that your faith should always issue in good deeds. You can't just walk around clutching your born again certificate saying, I believe all the right doctrines, but that you need to be bearing the fruit of a new life, a regenerated life, a life in Christ.

**Tim Keller**

Your works don't save you, but they reveal.

**Kathy Keller**

What has changed?

**Tim Keller**

We are justified by faith apart from works, but saving, justifying faith always results in good works.

**Kathy Keller**

That's right.

**Tim Keller**

And therefore, submission will bring fruit and amen.

**Kathy Keller**

Okay.