

What's With All the People Showing Up at Worship?

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV)

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What do you think is the most popular holiday in America these days? Any guesses? It's got to be Christmas, right? It's not. Recent surveys indicate that Thanksgiving is now number one. 98% of American adults say that they have heard about Thanksgiving. 80% say they like it. By comparison, only 94% of American adults say they have heard of Christmas, and only 77% say they enjoy the festivities of this season.¹ That's surprising to me, not only that Thanksgiving is number one, but there are people out there who have never heard of Christmas! Where are these people hiding! Still, though it has fallen to second place, most people these days still celebrate Christmas, and for

many of them that includes showing up at worship on Christmas Eve.

Did you know that every single person who encounters the baby Jesus in the Gospel accounts of that first Christmas also ends up in worship? 100%. The angels worship Jesus, singing "Glory to God in the highest heavens!"² The shepherds, taking their cues from the angels, returned to the fields glorying and praising God for all they had seen and heard beside the manger.³ The wise men were overwhelmed with joy and prostrated themselves on the ground in worship when they entered the house under the star where they found the baby.⁴ Simeon and Anna praise God in the temple when they finally meet the child for whom they have waited their whole lives.⁵ And of course Joseph and Mary worship God for this wondrous thing which has happened to them and, in Mary's case, in her.

It shouldn't surprise us that Christmas still draws so many people to worship God. Church pews around this nation will be as full today and tonight as any time of the year. There's even a term for those who don't normally come to worship, but who show up on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday: CEO stands for "Christmas and Easter Only". One church posted this sign as a gentle way to invite people to worship with them a little more often. Why is that? What is it about Christmas that still draws us to worship, even those of us who aren't normally prone to worship? The answer may be found in the first recorded act of Christmas worship which we just read.



As Luke records it, one day, apparently out of the blue, an angel named Gabriel comes to visit this young woman named Mary to deliver a stunning message: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary is perplexed. More than perplexed, actually. The word implies that she is confused, disturbed, even troubled.⁶ You would be too if an angel paid you a visit with a special message from God. The angel tries to ease her trouble: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Twice for emphasis the

¹ Aaron Earls, "Christmas No Longer Most Popular Holiday in America", *Lifeway Research*, December 12, 2023. Read the full article at <https://research.lifeway.com/2023/12/12/christmas-no-longer-most-popular-holiday-in-america/>

² Luke 2:14

³ Luke 2:19

⁴ Matthew 2:11

⁵ Luke 2:22-38

⁶ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G1298>

angel makes clear that she is God's favored one. The word here in the original Greek is the word *charis*, which is literally translated "grace".⁷ Don't miss the point. Mary is not being told that she has *earned* God's favor. It's true, Mary is a remarkable person. The Gospel accounts describe her as one who is thoughtful, obedient, believing, worshipful, and even devout to Jewish law and piety. But let's be careful to notice that none of those qualities are listed as the reason God shows her favor and chooses her for this unique and sacred assignment. It is grace which is behind this favor God shows Mary, undeserved, unearned, unexpected grace.⁸

When the angel calls Mary "favored one" in verse 28, the word in Greek is so unusual that it only shows up one other time in the New Testament. It literally means "highly favored". The other time it shows up is in Ephesians 1:5-6: "[God] **destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.**"⁹ A literal translation of "freely bestowed on us" would be "made us objects of grace."¹⁰ Do you see what this means? It means that though Mary is unique in the assignment she was given from God, she is not at all unique in the favor she is shown by God. Apparently we all are highly favored, and not because we have earned it, but simply by grace. The Lord has determined to favor us no matter what.

I think you would agree that few things in life are better than finding favor with another. To this day I clearly remember the first time I discovered that a member of the opposite sex favored me. After finding out in 6th grade that Rosmary DelCarlo thought I was something special, I walked home that day on cloud nine! It's good to be favored. Do you know the favor of a mother or father, a parent who simply delights in you as their son or daughter? How about when you discover that a teacher or coach you really admire chooses you as one of his or her favorites? Do you know that feeling? Even when you find out that a person who was once an enemy suddenly has begun to favor you, doesn't it change how you now feel about that person? Few things in life are better than finding favor in the eyes of another.

Now consider *unmerited* favor? Have you ever known this kind favor in your life? It's one thing to find favor when it is earned or deserved. We'll take it. But what about favor that is not earned, favor which is in fact undeserved? And what about finding out that it is God who favors you in this way? When God looks at you,

do you believe he says to you, "You are highly favored. You are my favored one."? I've told you before that I tell each one of my four children that they are my favorite. And it's true. When I think about Isabel, my oldest, I think to myself, "Well, she's is my favorite. I delight in her, and always have." But then I think about my son, Noel, and I come to the same conclusion, "He's my favorite, always has been." It's the same right on down the line with all four, each one my favorite.

Yes, Mary is God's highly favored one. But she is not unique in this. I believe that through Christ, the same thing can be said of you. The question is, do *you* believe it? Do you believe that when you come into God's mind – and you are always in God's mind by the way – do you believe that your Creator is thinking, "He is my favorite one. She is my favorite one. Always has been."? If by God's grace you can come to believe this, and believe that such favor from God is in no way earned but a sheer gift of grace, then you will come to know the sweetest freedom in life.

You see, this is why the angel tells Mary not to be afraid, because if you know the unmerited favor of God, what do you have to fear in life? You can't lose this favor by disappointing God. It's not conditional in that way. You didn't earn it in the first place! And if others reject you in this world, what does that matter to you when the Creator himself calls you his favorite? Whose opinion is more valuable than his? How can we fear scarcity in life when we are beloved sons and daughters of a Father in Heaven who has in his possession every last molecule in the universe? Even death loses its fear in God's favor. How can we fear the grave when the One who favors us has already overcome death and promised to make a way for us into eternal life!

Do you know this sort of favor from God? If you do – once you do! – it will change everything.

Having established God's favor for her, and made clear that there is no reason to fear, the angel then gives Mary the news that she is going to give birth to God. Can you imagine? Beginning in verse 32 Gabriel goes on to explain that her firstborn son will have unqualified and absolute greatness. He will be the "Son of the Most High", an exclusive name used only for the one true God. He will take the throne of his ancestor King David, fulfilling his role as Messiah. And the kingdom he comes to establish will be ruled with sovereignty and last forever. Again, can you imagine?

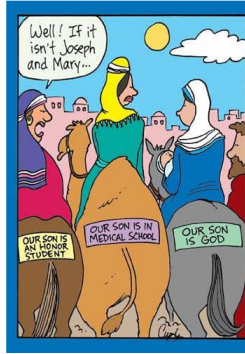
⁷ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G5485>

⁸ I'm indebted to Fred B. Craddock for this insight, *Interpretation Commentary: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 27-28.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, this and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

¹⁰ <https://studybible.info/IGNT/Ephesians%201:6>

I came across this cartoon the other day and it reminds us, in a humorous way, the honor bestowed here on Mary and Joseph. Our son is God. Understandably, this is a lot for Mary to take in.



What do you consider to be the greatest miracle ever performed by God? Creation? The universe from nothing? That's pretty impressive. How about a flood that covered the earth, or parting the Red Sea, or making 90-year-old infertile women conceive children? How about all the healings Jesus did – blind people seeing, deaf people hearing, paralyzed people dancing? Walking on water? Water to wine? Raising people from the dead? Our what about the resurrection of Christ himself? Many people consider Easter the greatest miracle of all.

Though all these are extraordinarily impressive, some would argue that it is actually the incarnation which is the most impressive miracle God ever did. The Creator entering his creation, the eternal stepping into time, the divine becoming human. God as a baby. C.S. Lewis once called the incarnation the “Grand Miracle”. He wrote in his book called *Miracles*,

Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.... [The incarnation] was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about...He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still...to the womb...down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.¹¹

If Jesus was just human, if there was no miracle of the incarnation, than all the other miracles surrounding his life become very difficult, if not impossible, to accept. But if you accept this one miracle, that Jesus the man was also divine, then it is no great leap at all to then believe that Jesus could do such things as is reported that he did. We would be surprised if he didn't! Why should the Author of life not rise from the dead? As Theologian J.I. Packer puts it, “The incarnation itself is an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else in the New Testament.”¹²

Sometimes in our modern arrogance we assume that people in the ancient world were not as sophisticated and perceptive, perhaps not even as intelligent, as we are today. Of course people believed things like this back then because they were gullible and superstitious. But it's just not true. Of course, people were just as intelligent back then as they are today.¹³ Plus, think about the crazy conspiracy theories that people run around believing in our time! Who are the gullible ones!

In the modern West we have been taught that science disproves the supernatural. But that's a total misunderstanding of what ‘supernatural’ actually means. By definition, the supernatural is outside of the laws of the natural world, and therefore can never be explained by science. It if could be, it wouldn't be supernatural. What happened to Mary had no logical explanation. In fact, Mary herself grew up in a culture that had trained her to believe that God could never – would never! – become a human being. It's no wonder that she asks, “**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**”

But not only was this miracle difficult for Mary to accept because it was so extraordinary and unfathomable, it was also difficult to accept because of the implications she knew it would have on her life. People back then could do math just like us. “Hold on just a minute! Let's see, Mary was married in September but her son was born in December. Hmmm. Something doesn't add up.” There were only two options, at least two viable options. Either Mary had sex with Joseph before she was married to him (not good), or she had sex with another man before she was married to Joseph (*really* not good). In the ancient world, childlessness for women meant shame, and pregnancy removed the disgrace. But the opposite was true of an unmarried woman, and so this pregnancy would have brought upon Mary tremendous disgrace or worse. Beyond that, she was going to give birth to a son she would one day have to watch face total rejection, and then suffer and die in the most excruciating and shameful way. Remember what the old man Simeon tells Mary when she takes her eight-day-old boy to be dedicated in the temple, “...**a sword will pierce your own soul too.**”¹⁴

I might suggest that the same two things which make the incarnation difficult to accept for Mary also make it difficult for you and me to accept. It also takes a great deal of faith on your part to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the eternal Son of God born to a virgin. We confess this in our creeds, but not everybody believes it,

¹¹ Cited by Don Mears, “Jesus Christ: The Incarnation: The Greatest Miracle”, *Grace Communion International*. Read the full article at <https://www.gci.org/articles/the-incarnation-the-greatest-miracle/>

¹² Cited by Matt Boga, “Unpacking the Incarnation with J. I. Packer”, *The Gospel Coalition*, December 23, 2019. Read the full article at

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/unpacking-incarnation-j-i-packer/>

¹³ I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2016), 82.

¹⁴ Luke 2:35.

not even in the church. Do you believe it? It's also difficult to accept because if you believe it, believe it to the point of embracing Jesus, you know that some of what awaited Mary also awaits you. Those who follow Jesus walk the difficult road of rejection and suffering that he walked. He once warned his disciples, "**The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.**"¹⁵ He leads us into life, yes, but he never pretends that the road along the way is easy. It's why even those who can find the faith to believe the incarnation is true, don't always take the next step of faith to follow after Jesus down such a difficult road.

Mary is one of the few. In spite of the barriers standing in the way, she nonetheless demonstrates remarkable faith. "**Here I am,**" she declares, "**the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**" Some have called this the best definition and model of faith in the entire Bible. Mary desires for God's word to become reality in her own life.¹⁶ Jesus prays a similar prayer the night before his crucifixion when he prays to his Father, "**Not my will but yours be done.**"¹⁷ And this is not just lip service Mary offers. This is obedience. She does not understand what it is that God is doing here in and through her. She has no idea how this will all turn out, only that it will be hard. And yet she realizes that the Lord is God and that she is not, meaning that she does not have the knowledge, the power, or the right to tell God what to do.¹⁸ Her place is merely to trust and to obey.

I would argue that this is the heart of true worship. Yes, worship includes showing up on a Sunday morning, even once or twice a year at Christmas and Easter, and singing songs, listening to preaching, offering prayers, and giving an offering. But true worship, worship which most pleases God, is the act of giving your life, your whole life, back to God. I love how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 12:1, "**Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.**"¹⁹ Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."²⁰

Did you notice the reason Paul says we should offer our whole lives back to God? "**In view of God's mercy...**",

he writes. It's because of God's favor, because he considers us highly favored ones even though in no way do we deserve such consideration, this is why we give our lives to Christ. You see, worship is never offered in an effort to obtain God's favor, but always offered as a response to God's favor. Same with obedience. We recognize who God is and what God has done for us through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we cannot help but respond by offering our whole lives as an act of worship.

In his book, *Hidden Christmas*, pastor Tim Keller remembers how he once heard a conference speaker frame all this by asking two questions. First, are you willing to obey anything the Bible clearly says to do, whether you like it or not? Second, are you willing to trust God in anything he sends into your life, whether you understand it or not? Keller says that if you cannot answer both these questions in the affirmative, then you may believe in Jesus in some general way, but you have never said to him, as Mary said to him, "**Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**"²¹ It's one thing to say you believe that as God, the Lord is free to do what he wills in this world. It's quite another thing, however, to submit to God and invite him the freedom to do what he wills *in your life*. Mary gives God that room.²² Do you? Will you?

Keller goes on to have us imagine that if the distance between the Earth and the sun – ninety-three million miles – was no more than the thickness of a sheet of paper, then the distance from the Earth to the nearest star would be a stack of papers seventy feet high, and the diameter of the Milky Way would be a stack of paper over three hundred miles high. Now keep in mind that there seem to be more galaxies in the universe than we can number, even more than there are grains of sand on a beach. If scripture is right, that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God conceived in the womb of Mary, can hold all this together with just a word of his power,²³ then is he the sort of person you invite into your life as your assistant, or the sort of person you periodically consider offering half-hearted reverence?²⁴ It's a fair question, don't you think?

We cannot believe in Jesus on our own terms, because to do so is to reject Jesus as he presents himself to us. To say we believe in Jesus, but to then live life mostly on our own terms, perhaps only turning to Jesus when we need his help from time to time, or when it seems convenient for us to do so, is to not believe in Jesus.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:14

¹⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Apollos, 2015), 50.

¹⁷ Luke 22:42

¹⁸ Timothy Keller, 90-92.

¹⁹ New International Version (NIV).

²⁰ From *The Message*.

²¹ Timothy Keller, 91.

²² John Indermark, *Setting the Christmas Stage* (Upper Room Books, 2001), 81.

²³ Hebrews 1:3 declares about Christ, "**He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.**"

²⁴ Timothy Keller, 91-92.

We live in a world that calls us to be true to ourselves. That makes self-denial and complete obedience to another almost an act of rebellion. And this why Jesus warned that this narrow, difficult road will also be lonely. Very few find it.

But remember, this is the road that leads to life. That is the promise. And I have become convinced that those who travel it are those who come to believe that what the angel said to Mary just as easily could have been said to them, that they are also highly favored by God, beloved by God not because they have earned it, but simply because God is love and he can do nothing other than love us.

Think about it, if you come to realize that the one who holds the universe in his hands, the one who is in possession of all that is and therefore can freely share freely his vast resources with anybody he chooses, the one who has the power over even life and death, if this one considers *you* so highly favored that he would step into creation, into the darkness of this world, and give himself so that you might live, if you come to realize this, then how can you not respond in worship? And not just at Christmas and Easter, and not just on Sunday mornings, and not just when it fits into your schedule and priorities, but offer your whole life, your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life, as a living sacrifice!

I want you to know that you are truly welcome here. If you haven't been here since last Easter, and the next time we see you is this coming Easter, you are still welcome here. I'm glad you are here. And if you show up more often, but are still unsure about all of it, still standing at a distance from Jesus unconvinced that a fuller commitment to him is a good idea, willing perhaps to give him Sunday mornings, but not much more, you also are welcome here. Having said that, I will say to you that it is my prayer that at some point the reality of this miracle of Christmas, and all that it led to, along with the radical favor God has shown you and continues to show you, will become so overwhelmingly beautiful to you that the only natural response you find in yourself is the response Mary found in herself: **"Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."**

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. So many more people show up to worship in the church on Christmas Eve? Why is that do you think? What draws people to worship this time of year? What draws you?
2. Read Luke 1:26-38. What do you notice here in this account of the angel bringing this news to Mary?
3. Do you believe you have come to know and believe the favor of God towards you? Do you believe that God looks at you and considers you highly favored? Why or why not?
4. Are you willing to obey anything the Bible clearly says to do, whether you like it or not?
5. Are you willing to trust God in anything he sends into your life, whether you understand it or not?
6. What do your answers do these last two questions say about what you believe about Jesus?
7. Consider Paul's words again from Romans 12:1 - **"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."** By his definition, what is true worship? By his definition, do you worship Jesus?
8. What do you sense Christ is saying to you personally through this message? How are you going to respond?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



After the angel told Mary that she was going to give birth to the Son of God, she said, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." What does she mean?