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Called to Obey

MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord;
let it be to me according to your word."

Luke 1:38

One Saturday a couple of Decembers ago, our family was enjoying one of those rare, slow mornings where no one had to be anywhere. Peter and I were lounging on our oversized beanbag. Our two children, Daryl and Amelia, were playing on the floor . . . when suddenly Amelia, who was three at the time, decided that she wanted to play superhero.

"I'm Spidergirl!" she announced, striking a dramatic spider pose.

She proceeded to assign roles to the rest of us: Daddy was Spiderman. I was Spiderwoman. And brother Daryl, who was six, was the Bad Guy.

Once she had assurance that Peter and I were prepared to play our parts, she announced her fearsome intentions: "Spidergirl is going to take care of the Bad Guy!"

And she stood there in the middle of the room in all of her spider glory—all brave and powerful for a few splendid seconds—until Bad Guy looked up from his cars and trucks

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long enough to catch wind of what was going on. He thrust out an elbow to fend her off.

Apparently, Spidergirl hadn't anticipated any sort of resistance to her conquest, because she was startled by the stiff arm and stumbled backwards into the bookshelf—momentarily deterred.

But, never fear—our heroine was *not* defeated.

In just a second she rallied and came toward Bad Guy again, with an even more powerful pose. "I'm Spidergirl!" she shouted.

This time, however, Bad Guy was also more prepared, and he attacked with a little karate chop toward Spidergirl's kneecaps.

He didn't even actually touch her, but Bad Guy's simple defense proved surprisingly effective because Spidergirl bolted in the direction of Spiderwoman and Spiderman, screaming, "Run awaaaaaay!" Then she kept right on running, right past us Spiderparents and out the playroom door.

A few minutes later, Spidergirl returned from her bedroom, sucking her thumb and pulling her favorite blankie behind her. I think, in her mind, the battle was over. She had retreated and, therefore, surrendered. And it was done.

Unfortunately, however, Bad Guy was still in combat mode. He saw that Spidergirl's defenses were down. He recognized her vulnerability and capitalized on it. He mounted a vicious Bad Guy offensive. He stomped on her precious blankie—hard—and this was simply too much for our heroine. Our little Spidergirl collapsed on the floor in a torrent of hot tears.

Such are the short-lived adventures of a three-year-old superhero.

But such is also my life—and yours, at times . . . isn't it?

That simple Spider-moment from two years ago sticks in my memory, I believe, because I see so much of myself in my Spidergirl.

Don't we all want to do something important with our lives? Don't we all want to matter in some meaningful way? Don't we all want to be a hero or a heroine? Don't we all set noble goals and make plans and steer our course accordingly? Don't we all sometimes strike a brave and powerful pose . . . at least for a moment?

But when opposition comes, as it always does—in the form of other people or difficult circumstances or just, well, life—don't we all know what it feels like to falter? Don't we all, at times, stumble backward stunned, or run away, or collapse on the floor in a torrent of tears?

I am probably most aware of my own inner-Spidergirl when I'm trying to scale the tallest of buildings. When the wall in front of me is sheer glass and several stories high. When I muster all my spider strength and start to climb, but then realize—sometimes of my own accord, or sometimes because I find myself in a frightening freefall—that I *don't* have what it takes. Not in and of myself at least.

And I remember that, if *God* has called me to face this enormous challenge and conquer this insurmountable obstacle, then He has done so precisely because only *He* has the super-powers to get me through.

And my role? Well, my role is to simply obey.

The Called

The pages of Scripture are packed with stories in which God calls ordinary people to seemingly impossible projects, and they respond in a wide variety of ways.

God calls Noah to build an enormous boat, big enough for every kind of creature, when there is no sign of rain. And Noah does everything just as the Lord has said.

God calls Abraham, at a ripe old age, to become a first-time parent, and then to be the father of an entire nation. The prospect is so preposterous to wife Sarah that she can't help but laugh.

God calls Moses from a burning bush and sends him to Egypt to bring His people out of slavery. Moses protests his assignment and argues his inadequacy multiple times. Then he utters a final pathetic plea for God to *please* send someone else.

God calls David, a mere shepherd boy, to be king of a nation and a man after His own heart. David accepts the assignment and soon after slays a giant through the power of God. But then later he also allows his own lust to lead him astray.

God calls Deborah, prophet and judge, to join Barak in leading Israel into battle. She speaks with authority and proves herself to be an effective leader during a difficult time.

God calls Esther, “for such a time as this,” to become a queen. And she risks her own life to go before the king and stand up for God's people and her own.

God calls Jonah to risk his very life to preach His truth to the vicious population of Ninevah. But Jonah runs in the opposite direction.

God calls the apostle Paul, with a blinding light, to leave

a life of violent aggression for a life of eternal mission on His behalf. Paul makes some missteps and experiences some interpersonal conflict along the way, but he is used by God to start and strengthen His churches all over the known world and for all time.

We could go on and on.

But one of my favorite biblical characters, who God called to an impossible mission, is Mary the mother of Jesus. She receives an assignment from God that no other woman throughout all of history has been given. She is called to carry and raise the Christ. But even though her journey is one-of-a-kind, her response to God's call can still be a source of inspiration for us.

Her journey—like yours, like mine—is fraught with highs and lows. However, in spite of the painful parts, or even perhaps because of them, Mary experiences God's love and witnesses His power made manifest in incredible ways.

In this chapter we are going to look at her story, what we know of it at least. And I pray that God will use it to deepen our faith in who Jesus is, and to challenge us to respond to God's call with a similar faith-filled obedience.

Read Luke 1:26–56.

The Story in Context

The Purpose of Luke. Interestingly, two of the four gospels—Mark and John—don't include much at all about Mary, or even about Jesus' birth. However the book of Luke takes considerable time with her story. Considering the author, the recipient,

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and the purpose of Luke will help us understand Mary's place in the book.

First, we don't actually know for certain who wrote the book of Luke. The author isn't named. However, several pieces of evidence—in both Luke and Acts—point toward Luke being the author of both. So there is little dispute on this point.

Second, Theophilus is named as the initial recipient (Luke 1:3). We believe that he was a socially prominent man, but beyond that, we don't know much about him. We don't even know if he was a Gentile or a Jew. Judging from the general nature of the book's counsel, though, we believe that Luke clearly meant the work to be read by a wider audience as well.

The purpose of the writing is a bit clearer. Luke himself explains his desire to record a carefully investigated, chronological account of the things that had happened among them. He acknowledges that many other writers have already recorded the story, but the inference is that they have been less than precise. Luke writes, then, to provide an accurate presentation of how God's plan to deliver humanity had unfolded right before their very eyes. With the goal of assuring Theophilus and other readers that their faith in Jesus is not misplaced, Luke depicts Him as both the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews and the Savior of all mankind.

But even though Luke's narrative communicates these central and essential theological beliefs, Luke is also a concrete and practical gospel. Over and over Luke describes how followers of Jesus must not only *believe* the truth "concerning the things [they] have been taught" (v. 4), but they also must *live out* their devotion in the choices they make each and every day.

Thus, when including a detailed account of Mary's story

and in giving her center stage in his gospel narrative, Luke addresses both of his writing goals. Certainly, as we will see, the angelic announcement of Jesus' virgin birth helps to prove His identity as the Son of God, while at the same time Mary's unre-served response to God's call provides a profound example of obedience for all of Luke's readers to follow.

Who Is This Mary? We first meet Mary in Luke chapter 1, when God sends the angel Gabriel to find her in her hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. For such a grand pronouncement, it is certainly a modest setting—an agricultural community, a rural village with a population of not more than four hundred people, and a region not held in high regard. Mary's humble roots, however, highlight God's desire to move and work among seemingly ordinary people.

Of Mary's life prior to the angel visit, we are told surprisingly little. Luke gives us just a few key pieces of information. He lets us know that Mary is engaged to be married to a man called Joseph, a descendant of David. A typical Jewish betrothal happened in two stages: a formal contract of engagement, when the bride price was paid, and then the actual wedding—about a year later. Evidently, Mary and Joseph are living through that yearlong waiting period.

Luke also tells us, multiple times, that Mary is a virgin. Whenever Scripture repeats something, we know that it must

WHENEVER Scripture repeats something, we know that it must be of particular importance, and we ought to pay attention.

be of particular importance, and we ought to pay attention. Surely, the identity of Jesus as the Son of God hinges on this all-important detail. Mary is a virgin, and—as the angel Gabriel will explain—Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit Himself.

An Impossible Call

As far as we can tell, Mary is alone in her house when the angel appears. I imagine her kneading bread or stitching a robe, when suddenly a glorious being fills the space with his brilliance. Before she can even catch her breath, Gabriel begins with a blessing and a promise and a declaration of God's favor.

Understandably, Mary is concerned and confused. But after reiterating her preferential position before God, Gabriel quickly delivers his astonishing news. Mary will conceive and give birth to a son—and she will call Him Jesus. But this isn't going to be just any baby. "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (v. 32).

Gabriel then paints for Mary an incredible picture of who this child will become. He will be a king, seated on the throne of David, reigning over the house of Jacob, ruling a kingdom without end.

But as grand as this announcement might sound, the angel's proposition doesn't make logical sense. Of course, Mary recognizes the absurdity and—sidelining the promise of royalty—she becomes fixated on that one disconcerting detail. She is a virgin.

So Gabriel further explains how this will happen. "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 called holy—the Son of God" (v. 35).

The rest of the book of Luke—indeed, the rest of Jesus’ life—will be spent trying to prove His identity as almighty King and Son of God to a people who are reluctant to believe. But for the time being, it is Mary alone who the angel needs to convince. So Gabriel offers Mary this bit of evidence, some more miraculous news. Mary’s relative Elizabeth—“advanced in years” and barren—is pregnant as well. In fact, she is already six months along.

“For nothing,” Gabriel proclaims, in his final parting promise, “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37).

How, then, does Mary respond?

I don’t know how you would have reacted to such a call, but I’m pretty sure that I would have asked for a bit more proof. I would have asked to examine some more concrete evidence before I made up my mind. I might have thrown out a fleece like Gideon did in Judges chapter 6, or I might have written out a list of pros and cons—a perfectly practical way to make a decision of this magnitude. I might have called some godly friends for wise counsel. Or I might have—in a very spiritual manner, of course—stalled and asked for the opportunity to take a couple of weeks and pray. If the angel had arrived on an afternoon when I was full of self-confidence and optimism, I might have accepted the assignment with pride. “I am Spidergirl!” Or if the call came on a difficult day, I might have responded more like Moses, with a series of “but I . . .” excuses. Like Moses, I might have explained to the angel all the reasons why I was exactly the wrong person for the job. Or I might have simply collapsed on the floor—overwhelmed—in a torrent of hot tears. That’s how I might have responded to the angel’s news.

But not Mary.

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I'm sure her head is spinning. And I'm sure that she can assess immediately that this is not going to be an easy road. To start with, she can guess that Joseph will have trouble understanding this astonishing news. Too, her family and community might shun her for being pregnant and unmarried. Those concerns are obvious. Yet, she responds—immediately—with complete conviction and commitment. “I am the servant of the Lord,” she tells the angel. “Let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38).

After the angel leaves, Mary's first order of business is to plan a trip to the hill country of Judea, outside of Jerusalem. It's at least a three-day journey of some eighty miles or more, not an easy journey for a young woman. But Mary is driven to find Elizabeth. She hurries to follow where God has led. She wants to see with her own eyes the sign of which the angel spoke. She longs to know more about what He's up to.

She may be a little timid as she approaches her elder cousin. She may not be entirely sure what Elizabeth will say about her shocking news, but Mary doesn't have to wonder long. She doesn't even have to break the news herself because as soon as Elizabeth sees Mary coming toward the house, the baby in her own womb leaps for joy! Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaims:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? . . . Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (vv. 42–45)

This meeting of the two mothers-to-be is one of utmost joy. From our vantage point, we know that both women will suffer great heartache because of their sons. Both women will know the deepest, most piercing pain a parent can possibly know. But both women will also experience unspeakable love. In this moment, though, both women simply wonder at their privileged position and the favor they have found with God. Both women are ready and willing to be used by Him—no matter the cost.

Mary responds to Elizabeth's declaration with her own psalm of rejoicing, her marvelous Magnificat. It begins as a song of very personal praise. Mary acknowledges God's sovereign authority and saving nature—in her life specifically. She also recognizes her own humble position. She proclaims that for all of time she will be called "blessed"—not at all because of who she is, but because of the great and mighty deeds that God alone has done. She is just a willing participant in His good work.

Then Mary declares the never-ending nature of God's mercy in a more general sense, to all people. She marvels at His powerful work of leveling the playing field, so to speak—of bringing down the lofty and raising up the lowly—of expressing His loyal love to His people with both justice and mercy forever.

When He Calls

When I think of the call of God in my own life, a few occurrences—both general and specific—leap to mind.

To begin with, I grew up hearing the gospel. My parents took me to church from the time I was born. One Sunday night when I was eight years old, our little Baptist congregation in Minneapolis watched the end-times movie *A Thief in the Night*.

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The film portrays the rapture and the resulting period of tribulation. The main character, Patty Jo Myers, wakes up one morning to discover that her husband and millions of other people have seemingly vanished into thin air; they have been taken away in the clouds. Along with countless other confused and frightened individuals, she has been left behind.

Truthfully, the movie terrified me, and every single night afterward I begged Jesus to come into my heart so I would not suffer the same fate as poor Patty Jo.

On a Sunday morning several weeks later, my Sunday school teacher asked our class to raise our hands if we had accepted Jesus as our Savior. I hesitantly put up my hand. My friend Debbie also raised hers and shouted out, "I do that every day!" I still remember feeling relieved at her pronouncement, because I shared her strategy.

Our Sunday school teacher took that opportunity to explain

the gospel as clearly as she could. She reminded us that people are sinful and in need of a Redeemer. She explained who Jesus is—God's Son sent to earth in the flesh. She told us that His death was on our behalf. He took the horrible punishment on the cross that we deserved. And she told us that, if we confessed our sins and asked Him to be our Savior and Lord, then we would be His forevermore.

I SOUGHT to better understand "the call of God." At times, I strained to hear it, and I begged for my own burning bush. Many times I asked to see some handwriting on the wall.

That night I prayed with my mom and answered His call to become His child.

Throughout the following decades, as I grew in my discipleship and my love for Jesus, I sought to better understand “the call of God.” At times, I strained to hear it, and I begged for my own burning bush. Many times I asked to see some handwriting on the wall. Should I go to this college or that? What major should I study? Which job should I pursue? Should I marry or stay single? How should I care for my parents? And sometimes, for long periods, He seemed so silent. Other times He surprisingly swung wide open certain doors. Over and over I saw Him light the path just before my feet.

Then, when I was not far from forty, I watched Him move again—in my own call to motherhood. After our three-year struggle with infertility and the loss of three babies to miscarriage and the disappointment of multiple disrupted adoptions, our hearts were rubbed raw. In 2006 we completed our dossier for a Chinese adoption. In 2008 I lost my mom to her cancer, and my dad’s health was in rapid decline. Then, in 2009, while we were still waiting for China to send our referral and we were realizing that it could *still* take three more years, we received two out-of-the-blue phone calls within twenty-four hours—two different friends providentially telling us about the same seven-month-old baby boy in Chicago, who was “coming up for adoption.” Were we interested in becoming his mom and dad?

To be truthful, unlike Mary, I didn’t immediately accept the call. By that time, we had received several similar calls, and each one had led to a door that seemed to slam in our face. So, no, I didn’t straightaway say, “May it be to me as you have said.” (In my defense, I also didn’t see an angel. *That* would have been

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helpful.) Instead, Peter and I took two weeks to examine the facts. We made numerous phone calls and learned that baby Daryl was not, in fact, “coming up for adoption”; he was coming into the foster system. His caseworkers did not know if he would eventually be adoptable or not. Bringing him into our home would mean loving him as our own, knowing that—quite possibly—he would eventually return to his birth mother. In my still-broken state, I didn’t know how I could manage that possible pain.

For two weeks Peter and I prayed and sought wise counsel. For two weeks we vacillated between what felt safe and what God seemed to be asking us to do. But ultimately, God used the wise words of some colleagues to confirm that God was indeed calling us to bring this baby home. So we contacted the caseworker and stepped out in shaky faith.

Stories like Daryl’s are difficult; they involve loss and grief in the lives of many people. The journey through the foster courts was fraught with highs and lows. But Daryl is now our adopted son, and we see God’s fingerprints all over his life. We also begin to see how God’s glory is made manifest as we heed His call and obey.

Read Matthew 1:18–24 and Luke 2:1–40.

He Is Born and the Piercing Is Prophesied

Mary stays with Elizabeth for three whole months before she returns home. Perhaps that gives her a little time to get her head around what is happening—to process and pray and prepare—with the elder Elizabeth by her side to mentor her

through. Then Mary leaves Elizabeth's home just before John the Baptist is born.

When Mary arrives home in Nazareth, undoubtedly her first order of business is to let Joseph in on her news. We don't know exactly when or how Mary tells him about the angel's visit. Luke doesn't actually record anything about this conversation. We have to turn over to the book of Matthew (chapter 1) to read of Joseph's response. And there we find that his immediate reaction is not as favorable as Elizabeth's. Initially, Joseph is as shocked and confused as Mary first was. He loves her, though, and doesn't want to disgrace her, so he plans to end their relationship quietly.

But before Joseph can implement his exit strategy, he receives his own angelic visitor in a dream. And then, after his meeting with the angel, Joseph's response is much like Mary's. He doesn't question. He doesn't protest. He simply obeys.

We return to the book of Luke (chapter 2) to find out what happens next.

Because of the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, Mary and Joseph make the long, uncomfortable trip to Bethlehem to register to pay their taxes. This is nearly a hundred-mile journey, eight to ten days by foot. A difficult excursion for anyone, let alone a very pregnant young woman. Mary isn't actually required by law to make this trip; Joseph could go alone. But likely she joins him to ensure that they are together for the birth. In addition, providentially, her journey to Bethlehem fulfills certain prophecies about the location of Jesus' birth (Micah 5:2).

When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, the little town is teeming with guests and every hotel is full. The only space they are able to secure is in a stable or cave—probably attached

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to one of the inns. And it is there, in that most humble of settings, that young Mary gives birth to her firstborn son. As is customary, she tenderly wraps the baby in swaddling cloths and lays Him in the manger—in part, because she has no other choice. But even more because that’s how God has ordained it to be—the lowliest of births for His only Son.

That night, in the surrounding hills, some of the same significant themes continue to play out—of ordinary people and angel announcements and glorious praise. The angel of the Lord appears to a band of shepherds, who are watching their flocks in the night. The glory of the Lord shines brightly before them, and the shepherds are terribly afraid. After the angel announces the good news—the birth of the Savior—he is joined by a whole heavenly choir of angels, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14).

When the angels disappear, the shepherds waste no time. They run straight into Bethlehem to find the baby, and they tell Mary and Joseph what the angel has said. Then after a time of testimony, the shepherds return to the field, praising God for what they have seen. And Mary treasures all these events and ponders them in her heart.

When baby Jesus is only eight days old, Mary and Joseph take Him to Jerusalem, to the temple—in keeping with the Jewish law—to present Him to God and dedicate Him to the Lord’s service. There they encounter an old man called Simeon—righteous and devout. He has been waiting for the Messiah to come. He lives expectantly—holding on to hope that God will deliver His people. In fact, the Holy Spirit has told him that he will not die until he has seen the Christ. And the Spirit

has also prompted him to go to the temple on this exact day for this meeting to take place.

Simeon recognizes Mary, Joseph, and Jesus immediately, and he takes the baby in his arms. Prophetically, he adds his praises to all who have gone before, as Joseph and Mary stand by, amazed at what is being said about their child. Although they have been obedient to God's call, and they are clearly devoted to following the law, they still cannot fully understand this journey that they are on, parenting the Son of God. They are processing it as it comes, and their understanding of who Jesus is will continue to grow throughout His lifetime.

But Simeon isn't finished with his pronouncement. Before he hands back the baby, he turns directly to Mary and says, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (*and a sword will pierce through your own soul also*), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (vv. 34–35).

This second part is a much more somber promise, isn't it? Because of this babe, many will rise and many will fall. He will split the nation in two. Some will believe, but many will not. Because of this babe, the people's hearts will be laid bare. Their reaction to Jesus will reveal, as well, their response to God.

And because of this babe—all He will do and all He will endure—Mary, His mother, will be stabbed right through to the deepest part of her being. A piercing will come. Her obedience, her following of God's call, will bring her both the greatest possible joy and the sharpest of pains.

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Read Luke 2:41–52; John 2:1–12; Matthew 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; and Luke 8:19–21.

The Push and Pull of Parenting

We have only one biblical account of Jesus when He was young. At twelve years old, He would be an “adolescent” by our description, but according to Jewish culture, He is almost a man. That year His parents take Him back to Jerusalem for the Passover, as they had done every year. But this time, when Joseph and Mary start the journey home, young Jesus stays behind in the temple—without telling His parents.

CAN YOU imagine thinking—for three whole days—that you lost the Son of God?

When Mary and Joseph discover Jesus’ absence, they hurry back to Jerusalem and scour the city

for their young son. For three whole days they search. Can you imagine thinking—for three whole days—that you lost the Son of God? Finally, they discover Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions and providing answers of His own.

When she sees Him, Mary’s fear and frustration are evident. She responds like any mom might respond to her twelve-year-old son. “Why have you treated us so?” she asks. “Your father and I have been searching for you in great distress” (Luke 2:48). The term she uses—“great distress”—describes a deep mental anguish, and we can certainly understand.

But we also know that the agony here is only a taste of what is to come.

While Mary's rebuke of twelve-year-old Jesus is understandable, His reply is not what we might expect. He doesn't apologize or comfort His mother in her distress. Rather, He questions their concern. In that, He demonstrates a developing understanding of His own call—a call to lead the people to His Father, a call to which He can only be obedient.

Mary and Joseph do not fully understand what Jesus is telling them. But for the time being, Jesus returns home with them and obeys. And again, Mary holds all these things in her heart. As she carries out her calling to raise this young man Jesus, it must hurt to see Him start to pull away.

And the tip of the sword begins to prick her heart.

The next account we have of Jesus and His mom is in John chapter 2. Jesus is about thirty years old, but His public ministry has not yet officially begun. Mary and Jesus and the disciples are all at a wedding in the nearby town of Cana. In this village culture, wedding celebrations last for several days, but while this particular party is still in full swing, the wine runs out. This would have been a disgraceful disaster for the host, and for reasons we don't fully understand, Mary takes it upon herself to address the issue.

She goes directly to Jesus and makes sure that He is aware of the problem. She doesn't specifically tell Him to do anything about it. She doesn't even ask Him to help. But the implication is that she believes that He can and she would like Him to.

Jesus, though, responds to Mary by questioning her intentions and declaring firmly His timing. His comment here resembles His response to her in the temple when He was twelve. "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). It is not a statement of disdain, but like His answer in the temple, it is another statement of distance.

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Jesus is reminding His mother, and the others present, that He is guided—not by the agenda of any human being, not even His mom—but only by the agenda of His Father in heaven.

Jesus' remark is also an allusion to the coming cross. The Greek word for “hour” is used repeatedly in the book of John to foreshadow the crucifixion, but it is a cryptic comment. And in that moment, it seems to be mostly lost on Mary.

Evidently, then, Jesus has a change of heart. Somehow He must signal a willingness to get involved after all, because Mary turns to the servants and simply declares, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). Jesus then performs His first public miracle. He turns six large pots of water into wine—and not just any wine, the best wine of the day. *And* there is more than enough.

This is the beginning of Jesus' signs, the beginning of His ministry, the beginning of His revelation of Himself as the Son of God, the beginning of His glory made manifest in this free and full and extravagant way. And at the observance of this miracle, His disciples begin to believe.

After that first public demonstration of His deity, Jesus' ministry expands quickly. He calls twelve disciples. He performs more signs. He travels from town to town, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. Large crowds gather and follow Him and press around—begging to be healed, wanting to hear the truth. Their demands become so great that Jesus and His disciples are often not even able to stop to eat.

When He returns to His hometown, His family and friends see what is happening, and many are concerned. Some of the scribes from Jerusalem say, “He is possessed of the devil.” Some of His own neighbors are concerned that He may have lost His mind.

Mary and Jesus' brothers decide that they must see Him and bring Him home. So they go to where He is, but the crowd is so thick that they can't get through. They have to send a message through the throng like a game of telephone: "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you" (Luke 8:20).

When Jesus hears of their arrival, however, He responds, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (v. 21).

This interaction is recorded by three of the four gospel writers. The anecdote is brief, but because it is retold three times, we know that it must be a significant exchange. An important distinction is being made here—between those who merely know Jesus in name and those who cling to His words and obey. An important definition of discipleship is being delivered—"those who hear the word of God and *do it*"—a discipleship that demands obedience.

We don't know exactly what this encounter means to Mary in the moment. None of the Gospels records her response. But we might imagine that—as Jesus continues to proclaim His identity, not as her son, but as the One sent from God—the blade of that proverbial sword sinks a little deeper still.

God and Man

Of course, we can't study the story of Mary without simultaneously marveling at the identity of Jesus the Christ. Certainly, no one knew Him better than she. When we examine in quick succession these several scenes that involve Mary and her son, we can see—in each passage—the powerful dual nature of our Savior, this God-made-flesh.

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The narrative of His birth highlights both His humanity and His deity. Mary, the young virgin, carries Him in her womb, yet He is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is laid in a humble manger, yet the heavens are filled with angels who announce His birth and give glory to God in the highest.

The interactions of Jesus and Mary in the temple when He is twelve and at the wedding in Cana demonstrate both His growing understanding of His role, and her growing understanding of His divinity. But at the same time, both scenes provide a precious glimpse into Jesus' domestic life. Though her son was sinless, Mary was not exempt from parental stress. And as He distances Himself from His family on earth and follows the call of His heavenly Father to become the Savior of all mankind, we feel Mary's maternal ache.

The identity of Jesus as both God and man is central to the Christian faith. We find an affirmation of this belief in the second paragraph of the Apostles' Creed and in the doctrinal statement of many churches. And as Simeon prophesied over eight-day-old Jesus, the declaration of His deity demands a response, and it will divide the nations in two. Some will believe. Others will not. And in His presence, the deepest thoughts of our hearts are revealed.

Read John 19:16–30 and Acts 1:1–14.

A Final Act of Love

The next time we see Mary is in John chapter 19 as she stands at the foot of the cross. Jesus has been betrayed and tried and beaten. He and Simon have carried the cross up to Calvary, and

the soldiers have hung Him between two criminals. On His cross they have posted the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek for all to read. The soldiers are casting lots for His clothes.

But there, standing nearby—watching and weeping—is Mary. Her sister and two other Marys are also in the crowd, as is John, the disciple whom Jesus loves. When Jesus looks down and sees Mary’s sorrow, He demonstrates His love for her in a final act of protection and care. In that moment, He is not only Savior of the world, He is also her firstborn son.

He says to Mary—speaking now of John—“Woman, behold, your son!” (John 19:26). And to the disciple John, He says, “Behold, your mother!” (v. 27). In other words, “Take care of her. Treat her like you would your own mom.”

Then, knowing that all things have been accomplished and that Scripture has been fulfilled, He requests a drink. When He has received the sour wine, He says, “It is finished!”

And He bows His head and gives up His spirit and dies.

But that is not the end of Mary’s story—this brutal death of her son. And of course, it is not the end of His story either because He rises again on the third day! He walks among His followers and makes Himself known.

Forty days after His resurrection, He calls His disciples to a life of witness, and He promises them a Helper in the Holy Spirit. Then He ascends back into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

Luke then records in Acts chapter 1 that the disciples return to Jerusalem that day—to the upper room where they are staying. Undoubtedly, they have a lot to talk about. They have plans

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to make and questions to ponder. But they are not alone. Some women are there too. Jesus' brothers have joined them. And Mary is present as well, pledging herself—along with the others—to prayer and to the all-important mission of Jesus to save a lost world.

What a journey this woman has had! From a young girl, standing startled in the presence of an angel, receiving her call to become the mother of a King—to a devoted disciple of her own son.

When Comes the Call

Jodie came to my office one afternoon last week, contemplating “the call of God.” She is preparing to graduate in just a couple of months, and she doesn't yet know what the future holds. Should she stay in Chicago and continue in her current administrative job? It pays decent money, and the ministry she works with on the weekends would also love to keep her around. She already has a roommate and an apartment in the city, so this plan feels like a “sure thing.” Or, should she take a riskier route and pursue an unpaid internship with a prominent ministry way out on the West Coast? Working with this organization sounds like her “dream job,” but sorting out the logistics—housing, transportation, funding, etc.—feels like an insurmountable obstacle. Or, should she return home to Tennessee to live with her parents for a while? She would treasure the time with them, and she could save money more quickly for graduate school. But other than family, there's nothing much for her there, and moving home feels like taking several steps backwards.

At one point, Jodie looked over at me with wild eyes,

grabbed ahold of her hair with both hands, and pretended to rip it out at the roots. “Why can’t God just make it clear?” she cried.

As a Bible college professor, I have conversations like this on a regular basis. Several times every semester, students show up at my door, asking for help to discern: What does God want me to do? What is He calling me to? How can I know for sure? Or even—certainly He can’t want *that!*

Okay—let’s be honest—it isn’t only my students who are asking these questions. Even though I am well into my forties, I sometimes still wonder and pray in this way. God, should I continue down this path or should I take a turn? Should I say “yes” and walk through this seemingly wide open door, trusting that You will give the strength? Or, for the sake of my family, my health, and my own relationship with You, do I need to say “no”? Or, Lord, this is so hard; does that mean it’s not Your will?

In November 2015, Dee Ann Turner wrote an instantly popular *Relevant* magazine article called “4 Keys to Discovering Your Calling.” And because “calling” is often on my mind, I read with great interest her four points:

- Your calling is the thing that gets you up in the morning.
- It’s what others tell you that you do best.
- It’s the way you use your energy to make an impact.
- And it’s the moment and the activity in which you feel God’s pleasure.¹

These are helpful points to consider. And I do agree with them—to a certain extent. Certainly it is wonderful when God calls us to something that lights a fire in our soul. Certainly

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people may occasionally acknowledge our strengths, and I enjoy pointing out the abilities I see in other people. God gave us those skills, no doubt, and He doesn't intend for them to go to waste. Certainly, too, God sometimes allows us the satisfaction

SOMETIMES our calling causes us to cower under the covers. Sometimes God calls us to build that great big boat when there is no sign of rain.

of experiencing our own effectiveness, of seeing a project succeed or a problem solved, and it is certainly rewarding when this is the case. And certainly there are seasons when we sense His great pleasure throughout the process.

Certainly these things are true.

However, as we see in the life of Mary and so many others throughout Scripture, hearing and heeding the call of God shouldn't mean searching for something that is self-satisfying. Rather, it often means following His footsteps into the hard and even impossible places. It sometimes means being willing to stay in that space for as long as it takes—maybe even for a lifetime.

Because . . .

Sometimes our calling causes us to cower under the covers. Sometimes we respond with uncertainty and fear when we hear Him speak our name. Sometimes we respond with dread. Because sometimes God calls us to do crazy things. Sometimes He calls us to build that great big boat when there is no sign of rain. Sometimes He wants us to go to Nineveh and risk our very lives to share His good news. Sometimes He calls us to care for people who seem downright impossible to love. Sometimes

those unlovables live in a distant land across the sea. Sometimes they reside right under our own roof. So we love, not because we feel compelled. Not because the prospect propels us out of bed at the first light of day. We love simply because He commands us to and because He loved us first.

Sometimes our calling doesn't make logical sense. Sometimes, when He blinds us with His brilliance and we fall to our knees—ready to obey, others will dismiss us and doubt our place. Sometimes our calling seems far beyond our reach. Sometimes we feel shockingly ill-suited to the task. Sometimes when the burning bush beckons, we think of innumerable excuses to explain why we are not the best person for the job. But we get up and go. We march into Pharaoh's court with our knocking knees and our stuttering speech because He who calls will also equip. He promises His presence and His power. And these things are more than enough.

Sometimes we won't get to see the results of our work. Sometimes we may not see any measurable effect. Sometimes we will labor for years and see not one soul saved. Sometimes we won't get to build the temple or enter the Promised Land. Sometimes our prophetic cries in the wilderness seem to fall on deaf ears. Sometimes our witness will land us behind bars. Yet we keep our eyes on the eternal prize and strain our ears only to hear the ultimate "well done."

And sometimes we don't *feel* His pleasure. Sometimes we sense only silence. Sometimes we endure only the piercing pain. Sometimes we sit in the slimy belly of the fish. Sometimes we may beg for the cup to be taken away. "My God, My God!" Sometimes we *feel* forsaken. But we take up our cross and we follow Him.

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So, yes, sometimes God's calling looks like a miraculous virgin birth or the parting of a sea. And sometimes it looks more like a wander in the wilderness. Sometimes it looks like a nail-scarred hand. And sometimes—blessed Sunday—it looks like redemption and an empty tomb.

Always it looks like discipleship and requires obedience.

So may we have courage to face the furnace when necessary. May we have the tenacity to circle the city for the seventh time. And—regardless of whether it comes via an angelic announcement or a burning bush or a still small voice—may we have keen ears and willing hearts that will hear and heed God's call.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- With what part of Mary's story did you resonate most? Why?
- How can Mary's story help bolster your belief in Jesus' identity as both God and man?
- When have you been certain of God's call? Cite both general callings from Scripture and specific callings He may have placed on your life. Has the calling ever seemed impossible?
- How have you responded to God's call in the past?
- Has your calling come with a piercing part? How have you seen God equip you and sustain you when you responded to His call?
- Is God calling you to something right now? In what way is He asking you to obey? What is your response?