

Who Do You Think You Are? (4): Mary

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[0 : 00] Amen. I wonder, who do you want to be 20 years from now? 20 years probably seems like a long time for some of you down the front, maybe a bit less time the further back in the room we go.

Who do you want to be in 20 years? Do you know what? We're not so sure. Well, think about it. There's plenty of time left to think about it, isn't there? Who do you want to be 20 years from now? When we're younger, we usually answer that question with maybe a job we want to do, a career we want to follow. When I was in primary school, I spent a little bit of time wanting to be, I think, an author. Other kids were more ambitious than I was. Then as I got a little bit older, I spent a bit of time wanting to be a doctor. But then someone told me that was a lot of hard work. And so, true to the stereotype of a lazy teenager, it was genuinely my life's ambition between the age of, I think, 15 and 17 to be retired. That's what I wanted to be.

Sometimes the older we get, the harder it can be to answer that question. Maybe if you went and asked one of the students, usually over there, what they wanted to be, they might have a rough idea, but they might start to realize they're not actually too sure. If you went and asked one of the working adults, you'd probably find that we weren't really too sure at all. Who do we want to be 20 years from now? But even if we didn't have a definite answer, what I think we could say for certain is that we'd all want to be somebody, wouldn't we? We would all want to be someone. No one, do they? No one wants to be a nobody. But you know, for some people, they didn't really have a choice.

For a lot of history, people like Mary, who we've just been reading about in the book of Luke, they were destined to be a nobody from nowhere. We who live in the United Kingdom in 2023, we have no end of choices, do we? We go to secondary school and we get to choose what subjects to do. We then go to university or apprenticeships and there's no end of different courses you can try out. And at the end of it all, we have a long list of jobs that we try and pick the least worst from.

[2 : 37] Sometimes it feels like we have too much choice almost, doesn't it? It's hard to decide what to do with ourselves, but that's better, I think, than having no choice at all. But having no choice at all was what it was like for many people throughout history and in different parts of the world. And it was certainly true if you were from a small town called Nazareth, just to the west of the Sea of Galilee 2,000 years ago. And so it would have been pretty surprising to read what we do in verse 26 of Luke chapter 1. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth.

Why would God send an angel there? If it wasn't for the Bible, we wouldn't know about Nazareth's existence until at least 200 years after Jesus was born. It wasn't any maps, it wasn't even mentioned in any old books. Nazareth was not an impressive place and it wasn't an important place. They even had a saying at the time, can anything good come from Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?

I just flirt with the idea of offering a modern day example. I thought it wasn't worth the risk. Did I mention Ciaran's coming from Antroze? I should not, sorry.

Point is, if you were from Nazareth, you were destined to be a nobody. Nobody cared about it. Nobody was interested. There weren't schools or universities you could go to to work your way up in the world. Where you were born determined your career and what the world thought of you.

[4 : 34] You're from Nazareth. You're from Nazareth. Pfft. And I'm afraid to say that was particularly the case in those days if you were a young girl.

Mary was a woman in a society that discounted women. She was a poor, uneducated peasant living far from any place of power or importance.

From a town that even the rest of the Galileans, the hills around Nazareth, even they, and they weren't exactly high up in the social order of the day, they looked down on Nazareth. She was a nobody from a nothing place in the middle of nowhere. Nobody wants to be a nobody, do they?

But that's exactly who Mary was destined to be. And that's who she would have expected to be. She would have expected to live a life of obscurity, not being known like every girl before her, every girl around her, and every girl after her.

[5 : 49] But I wonder how many of you coming in here this morning had heard of Mary before we read about her in Luke chapter 1. We don't usually, aren't great at audience participation, so I won't put too much pressure on you.

But I bet if we put our hands up in the air, it would be pretty much all of us, wouldn't it? We all know who Mary is. A young girl from a nothing town in the middle of nowhere, born 2,000 years ago, and we all know about her.

She's probably the most famous woman in history. A woman who was destined to be a nobody from nowhere, became a somebody forever.

And it happened because of something amazing that God did, and something amazing that she did, and that you can do too.

What I want to look at this morning, just very briefly, is the part Mary played in going from a nobody to a somebody, because what changed Mary's life could, and I hope will, change yours as well.

[7 : 07] Our story will not be the same as Mary's story, will it? One of the beautiful things about being human is that God has made each and every one of us with a different life to live and a different story to tell.

So our story will never be Mary's story. But how she went from being a nobody from nowhere to a somebody forever is actually a path that her son Jesus invites every one of us to follow on.

Because two key things happen on Mary's journey. First of all, she hears the word of God. I wonder what you think it'd be like for an angel to visit you.

Sounds like it'd be quite an exciting experience, doesn't it? Imagine if an angel came and visited you this afternoon. What do you think that would look like? We often imagine them, don't we, all gentle and white with kind of halos on their head and gently fluttering wings.

Well, we don't actually know what they look like from the Bible, except that they could appear quite differently to different people at different times. In some places in the Bible, we actually read them as six-winged, fiery creatures.

[8 : 23] I wonder if you've got that in your nativity scene at home. Maybe we should. I imagine 10-year-old boys would find them much more interesting all of a sudden. We don't know what angels always looked like, but we do know what angels always said.

Because what angels said was what mattered. An angel's job was to be a messenger. God gave them a message.

And they would take that message and they would deliver it to whoever God wanted to hear it. So God sent Gabriel. We read about that in verse 26, don't we?

God sent Gabriel to Mary. So that Mary could hear not Gabriel's words, but God's words. That's pretty amazing, isn't it?

Wouldn't it be amazing for God to come and speak to you? If an angel showed up with a message from God, I bet we'd pay attention.

[9 : 31] Or I bet we think we'd pay attention. It would be amazing, wouldn't it, to hear God speak to us. But you know, every time we open our Bible, every time we open our Bible, maybe this is the first time you've ever opened a Bible, what's happening when we start reading the Bible, is that God is speaking to us.

These are his words, and he is saying them to you. That is amazing.

The Bible is not just any old book, and we shouldn't read it or listen to it like it's any old book. Every time you learn from it in Sunday school, every time we read it together here in church, we are hearing God speak to us, just as Mary heard God's words through Gabriel.

That is incredible. And it's actually more incredible and even better than having an angel come and visit us, because we get to read it, don't we, again and again.

We can talk with one another about it and help each other understand it. People won't ask whether that's what God really said, because we can point, can't we, and say, that's exactly what he said.

[11:11] If you think it would be cool to hear God speak to you through an angel, then how much more excited should we be about getting to hear God speak to us through this book?

So we, like Mary, we get to hear God speaking to us. But what really matters, what really matters is what happens next. Mary hears the word of God, and then secondly, and most importantly, she believes the word of God.

Let's just read again that verse that Hannah read for us earlier on. Verse 45 of Luke chapter 1.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

Mary is no passenger in the nativity story. Just look at verse 45 again. I wonder when you came in here this morning, if someone had asked you why Mary was blessed, what made Mary a somebody, what would you have said?

Mary was blessed because Mary believed. In fact, Jesus himself emphasizes that very point later on in Luke.

[12:37] While Jesus is teaching different things to some of his followers, and a woman in the crowd yells out, she's obviously loving what she's hearing, and so she yells out, blessed is the mother who gave you birth, and blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.

What do you think Jesus would say to that, I wonder? This person is saying a really nice thing about his mum, isn't she? Maybe he'd say, thank you.

Oh, that's really kind. She is a great woman, isn't she? That's not what Jesus says. Not quite. Listen to how he responds.

He says, blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. The woman cries, blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.

And Jesus says, well, not quite actually. He's not correcting the woman for getting the person wrong, is he? Mary was blessed. He's correcting the reason.

[13:48] Mary was not blessed simply because she gave birth to Jesus. Mary was blessed because she heard the word of God, and she believed it.

We can't follow Mary's footsteps in bearing the one and only Son of God. It was a once in history event that will never be repeated again. But we can follow Mary in doing what led her to be blessed. Hearing the word of God is a great thing. But it will only get us anywhere if we then believe and trust what we hear. That's what made Mary special.

That's what made Mary a somebody. And we can be blessed just like Mary if we believe God's words, just as she believed God's words.

I said a little earlier in passing, that it was a decision that would change Mary's life. And it could change yours too. And it did change Mary's life.

[14:57] And it would change yours too. But I think it's probably important to mention what that changed life looks like. It did not mean that Mary became really popular all of a sudden.

Believing the word of God meant believing something that the people around her would have thought was ridiculous. And that would not have been easy for her. It didn't mean that she became famous.

We might all know about Mary here now. But for all of Mary's life, she would have lived it relatively unknown. And even now, while we all know her, we know very little about her life, don't we?

It didn't mean she became rich. She still lived a life of relative poverty, as far as we can tell. It didn't mean she had an easy life. Seems pretty clear Mary lost her husband, Joseph, at quite a young age.

And we know without doubt, don't we, that she had to watch her son die on a cross. Completely innocent, yet cruelly crucified.

[16:14] Believing the word of God will not make you more popular. It will probably not make you any richer. It likely won't make life any easier. But it will make life so much better.

So much better. You might hear what we've just gone through and think, how can that possibly be? But listen, if you are blessed by God, believing his words, you will never be a nobody.

Because you will be known every day of your life by God himself. And if you are known by God, you will forever be somebody that matters forever to the most important person of all.

That won't always make tomorrow happier or easier, but it will make the rest of your life better.

Because you won't have to go through any of the ups and downs on your own.

And it will give you a life to look forward to. Beyond this world too. Maybe the most famous verse in the Bible, isn't it? God sent his one and only son, John 3, 16.

[17 : 27] That whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life. Eternal life is what we get when we believe the word of God, when we believe Jesus.

I started by asking who you want to be in 20 years' time. Let me finish by asking, and I mean this quite seriously, who do you want to be in 200 years' time?

We don't want to be a nobody, do we? Nobody wants to be a nobody.

But we can all be a somebody forever if we too follow in Mary's footsteps and believe the word of God. Mary has been and is and will always be known by Jesus as his own.

Not because she gave birth to him, but because she heard and believed the word of God. And that can and should be us too if we hear and believe.

[18 : 43] Let me say a quick word of prayer before we sing another song together. Our Father, we thank you so much for the wonderful story of Mary.

We thank you for how you came to her who was not known by anyone in the world, who was not cared about by anyone important. We thank you that you came to her and we thank you that she believed the word that came to her.

We pray the same for each and every one of us here, that we would hear the word of God that we do not deserve to hear and that we would believe it and so have everlasting life in the name of Jesus, in which we pray.

Amen.