

JUST MERCY FOR VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

Luke 1:26-37



JUST MERCY SERIES

BEFORE

THE LESSON

Luke approached the story of the gospel from a unique perspective: that of a physician, someone who would have first-hand experience with the most vulnerable populations in his neighborhood. Throughout his writings, he would focus on Jesus as good news for the poor — whether that be poor in money, poor in status, poor in spirit, or otherwise — and tell stories of Jesus welcoming those who the rest of society pushed to the edges.

As we look at the story of Mary, when the angel appears to tell her of her role in the life of the coming Messiah, we see a beautiful example of how God treats and aligns himself with the marginalized. Tradition says that Luke spoke to Mary herself to find out what really happened before Jesus's birth, and in the passage of scripture we will be studying, we get insight into Mary's own heart. We will be connecting Mary's experience with those who are victims of sex trafficking and examining how God tenderly and respectfully welcomes them.

Tonight's conversation may go to some sensitive, complicated, and uncomfortable places. That's okay. Take some time to pray before your group starts asking the Holy Spirit to be with you in your discussion, and reassure your group that this place together and in the presence of the Spirit is a safe place to be.

STARTING

THE LESSON

Today we're studying a passage of scripture that is a familiar story from Christmas and Advent: when the angel appeared to Mary to tell her she would conceive and give birth to Jesus. But the lessons from this moment extend beyond just the nativity scene.

It's no secret that that Ohio has one of the highest rates of human trafficking in the country and though it's uncomfortable, it's a topic that needs to be discussed more often, especially in our churches. Those affected by the sex trafficking industry are all around us and in

need of restoration and love — something Jesus willingly offers, and that we can extend as his followers. As we study Mary’s story, we will uncover God’s example of how to treat the vulnerable around us.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

It is not uncommon for people in our groups to experience strong emotion or to feel uncomfortable or awkward at some point in our gatherings. Remember, it is not your job as a leader to control everything everyone feels, but to create a safe and supportive atmosphere, to model and promote good listening, and to help people turn toward God as they process what they feel in healthy ways.

STARTER QUESTIONS

- What were you like in high school? Think back to your teen years. What sort of interests and activities were you involved in? What did you want to be when you grew up? Were you attending church at the time?
- Have you ever been asked to take on a particularly challenging task? What was it? How was it presented to you, and how did that make you feel?

OPENING PRAYER

- Lord, help us to see ourselves and the people around us the way you do – not as the least or last or those pushed to the margins, but as people who you embrace and invite to be your beloved children and as our brothers and sisters in your kingdom. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Luke 1:26-37 (NIV)

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. 36 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. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Based on today's scripture passage, create a short biography of Mary. Who was she? What was her life like at this point?

- *She was a young devout Jewish woman living in the small town of Nazareth, betrothed to Joseph and preparing for her upcoming marriage.*

According to v. 26-28, who brings a message to Mary? How do they greet her?

- *The angel Gabriel, who tells Mary the Lord is with her and she is highly favored.*

The angel Gabriel is a figure that has shown up to deliver messages from God to prophets in the Old Testament (see Daniel 8-9) and to announce the upcoming birth of important figures in the New Testament. Earlier in Luke 1, Gabriel appears to Zechariah to tell him his wife will bear a son. Flip back in your Bible and read aloud Luke 1:11-20 and compare and contrast

Zechariah's experience with Mary's. What happened? How did the two respond to the angel?

- *Same: the angel appeared to one person with no witnesses, both were told they were having a son, what to name him, and what he would do, both asked the angel a question, both messages spoke of Elizabeth by name.*
Different: Zechariah at the temple while Mary (presumably) at home, Zechariah was 'gripped with fear' while Mary was 'greatly troubled' and wondering, Zechariah was doubtful while Mary was curious, Mary is told that she is favored.)

It had been nearly 400 years since the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, had heard from God, and never before had an angel appeared to a woman. Knowing this context — and the lack of precedent for it — how surprised do you think Mary felt upon being greeted by Gabriel?

- *Think back to the ice-breaker question of what you were like in high school. Mary was of marrying age when she got this news, but likely still a teenager. How do you think you would have reacted in her situation? What might you have done differently? Would you have been as willing to accept the responsibility?*

In Mary's day — as in ours — her situation would have been met with judgment and stigma. In light of both the prophets and the Gospel record, we know Mary to have been innocent and worthy. But to have become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and to be put in the position of defending that fact among her own people was a difficult position indeed — aside from Joseph, her betrothed, and Elizabeth, her cousin, we do not know how many believed her. How do you think Mary might have been treated by her peers, family, and community as her pregnancy

progressed and she held firm to the fact that she was carrying the Son of God in her womb?

- *She was likely ostracized, shamed, taunted, teased, and worse.*
- *We can draw some interesting parallels between the likely reaction to Mary, the mother of Jesus, by her own community, and the reactions that women who are the victims of sex trafficking today experience in theirs. Most victims of sex trafficking are young, in their mid-teens, female, poor, possibly discarded or unwanted, and find themselves in troubling and nearly impossible situations.*
- *As was mentioned at the start of today's study, it's no secret that Ohio has one of the highest rates of human trafficking in the country. It is a tragic reality that is happening all around us. According to Ohio's Human Trafficking Task Force, the most vulnerable populations — the poor, the hurting, the abused — are being targeted specifically by traffickers, and being pressed into the sex trade against their will. They are there not because of their choice, but as a result of coercion and desperation.*

What other things might these two groups have in common? How are these young women treated in our modern society? Take an honest look at your own response towards women you may have encountered in these situations. Is your gut reaction to judge them for the choices that brought them to where they are, or to regard them with compassion? What do you think informs your reaction?

- *Different answers are possible here, as people examine their own hearts, behaviors, and motivations.*
- *What we see throughout the Gospels, and specifically in this story, is that God aligns himself with the marginalized.*

He takes the side of the sick, the hungry, the mourning, the imperfect, and gives them dignity in his Kingdom.

As we review the passage of text from Luke, in what ways do you see Mary being treated with dignity, especially in ways that would have been unexpected in her time and place?

- *First, she is approached directly by a messenger from God (the angel Gabriel, v. 26-28). Mary was given the privilege of learning about her role in the Messiah's coming first-hand. She is praised as a virtuous woman, etc.*

What do you think this says about God's opinion and treatment of women?

- *It indicates God's high view of women, and demonstrates the tenderness and care he brings to his interactions with women.*

Reread v. 28-30. What are Mary's emotions in this moment?

- *She is troubled, she wonders what is being asked of her.*

How does Gabriel respond to her emotions?

- *By reassuring her. In a second example of God affirming dignity, we see Mary's feelings validated instead of dismissed. God cares about our emotions.*

How does Mary respond after being told about the son she will bear?

- *She asks the question 'how?'*

What does Gabriel do in reply?

- *He explains how. In a third dignifying moment, Mary's question is taken seriously, and answered truthfully and without patronization.*

Finally, what happens in v. 38?

- *Mary obliges. While Gabriel has come to tell Mary what God has in store for her, nothing is put into motion until she gives her consent. Even in this most important of circumstances, Mary is not exploited, but is drawn into the story and asked to participate.*

These four examples of how Mary was treated shows us how God views the vulnerable and treats the marginalized, and, by extension, how he wants us to treat those alongside us: with dignity, validation, and care, and not with exploitation, dismissal, or patronization.

As defined by the leaders within the [Vineyard Justice Network](#), justice is the work of bringing things into right alignment with the Kingdom of God — it is restorative, long-term, and orients towards reconciliation.

Based on the example shown by the angel Gabriel towards Mary, how should we work to bring victims of the sex trafficking industry into God’s kingdom?

- *Many answers are possible here, but in general, with love and care that points them toward the God who brings restoration and dignity to everyone.*

PRAYER MINISTRY

Option 1: Open Your Heart to Compassion

It is human nature to look at the lives and situations of others — especially those we have not experienced ourselves — and react with judgement, but as followers of Jesus we are asked to respond with grace and compassion. What judgements do you need to ask for forgiveness for? For today's ministry time, open the group in prayer asking God to help us rid judgement from our hearts and open them up to compassion. Leave some extended time to let members pray silently (or aloud if they're comfortable) asking God for forgiveness. Close the prayer by thanking God that He is compassionate, tender, and welcoming, and asking for help to be more like him.

Option 2: Caring for the Vulnerable

Put your care into practice and schedule some time in the upcoming weeks to create care packages for local sex trafficking survivors. Visit humantrafficking.ohio.gov to discover some local programs working with this audience, and connect with them to find out what items are most needed by survivors. Collect items with your group and take some time to pray for the recipient of each package before donating. To learn more about Vineyard Columbus' anti-human trafficking efforts, contact Diane Bauman at diane.bauman@vineyardcolumbus.org.