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It's that time of year when the media make lists: top 10 most influential people in 2018, top 10 films, top 10 cars, and so on. Among the several excellent Bible apps, "YouVersion" Bible app has produced a list of Bible verses, most shared, bookmarked and highlighted.

In the United States, Chile, Peru, France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and South Africa, the most shared, bookmarked and highlighted verse in 2018 was Isaiah 41:10, *"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold you with my righteous right hand."*

In China and Russia (two former communist countries) it was Proverbs 4:23, *"Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life."*

In Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Germany, it was Joshua 1:9, *"Haven't I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

Egypt, India, and Iraq (where Christians are a minority), 1 Peter 5:7, *"... casting all your cares on him, because He cares for you"*, was most highlighted.

It was John 3:16 in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Turkey: *"God loved the world in this way: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."*

In Ghana, Nigeria, United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, Australia, Canada and United Kingdom, the top verse was Jeremiah 29:11: *"I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope"*.

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The founder of "YouVersion", Bobby Gruenewald says, *"This year's data shows people worldwide are continuing to turn to the Bible in search of comfort, encouragement, and hope."* People across the world are despairing of our condition, and turning to the Bible by the billions to find assurance and comfort, guidance and direction. With all the tools available to us, online and in print, we have little reason for not digging deeper into God's Word.

As we read through the familiar Christmas account of Jesus' birth, the phrase *Do not be afraid...* is spoken to several people throughout Jesus' birth narrative.

Last Sunday we saw Zechariah and Elisabeth experience God's answer to their prayers. Today we shall examine the life of Mary, reminding ourselves once again, our focus is to **discover worship** in her life.

As Mary comes onto the scene in the first chapter of Luke, the state of Israel as a nation was not too different from where we are at the present.

There was chaos in the relationship between Israel and the Roman empire, the same as our relationship with the EU. Leaders jockeyed for position, power and authority then, as they do now.

The Chief Priest, like our Prime Minister, had a thankless job, unable to please everyone and unable to govern; having to relate with a power base, far from day to day life. Rome thought they had Jerusalem under control, and Jerusalem wanted Rome off their back. Sound familiar?

In that social and political setting, a young Jewish girl, in typical Jewish tradition, is engaged to be married to a young Jewish carpenter. Their

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engagement ceremony would have been similar in significance to our wedding, to be followed by the ceremony of the bride entering her new home, but only when the bridegroom's father was satisfied, it was fit for the couple occupy. After all, the groom's father gave his word to the bride's father that she would be as comfortable as she was in her parent's home.

Between her engagement to Joseph and when she entered their home, Mary would have been busy acquiring and learning home skills: cooking (family favourites, traditional recipes), managing money, learning chores around the home, while Joseph would have been busy building their home. The couple would have met in chaperoned settings under the watchful eye of elders. They would have talked about everything a young couple in love would talk about! Both were brought up in devout Jewish families where rites and rituals, like family prayers and celebratory meals were part of life.

Sometime after their engagement, Mary had an encounter which changed her life. Six months into Elisabeth's pregnancy, the Angel Gabriel returns, this time to Mary's home in Nazareth.

Unlike his encounter with Zechariah, Gabriel seems understandably nervous speaking with Mary, and communicates with her using Royal language:

- he does not greet her by name - *Greetings to you who are highly favoured! The Lord God is with you!*
- Gabriel also uses **the Royal 'we'**, when he says *Greetings to you who are highly favoured!*

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Gabriel then informs Mary, she will have a Son, who is to be named **Jesus**. He will be famous as the Son of the Most High; God will give to Him the throne of his father David¹, and he will rule over the house of Jacob, forever. Mary may not have understood the significance of the Son to whom she will give birth, whose birth was predicted 700 years prior by the prophet Isaiah: *For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given* - the child is born of a human mother, but the Son is given by His Heavenly Father!

This is the part Mary could not understand: she knew the naming ceremony and in her mind she knew she would have to do it; she might have accepted the "**the throne of David**" and the "**House of Jacob**", because these phrases would have been said during prayers, and during the the Passover liturgy.

She might have barely understood that her Son would step out from Heaven as Son of the Most High, in the lineage of David, onto the earth where her Son will reign over the house of Jacob.

It is natural for Mary to be confused **when and how** this would happen. We would too! God lives in timeless eternity, and we live in a time-defined bubble. Mary's question reflects her thoughts, *Will I give birth to a Son after Joseph and I are together, because I can't seem to see how it might happen otherwise!*

Gabriel then begins to weave the threads of history, bringing them together to this point. *The Holy Spirit will father your child - that's how the*

¹ The promise to David was, that there should "not fail" a man to sit on his throne, or that his throne should be perpetual 1 Kings 2:4; 1 Kings 8:25; 1 Kings 9:5; 2 Chronicles 6:16, and the promise was fulfilled by exalting Jesus to be a Prince and a Saviour, and the perpetual King of his people.

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Son will be Holy, the Son of the most High. Remember your cousin Elisabeth who was childless? Well, she is now six months pregnant!

Then comes the most important reminder of all, ***Nothing is impossible with God!*** Don't we need to hear this more often these days? If you have been praying for someone or something, this is a wonderful reminder that your prayer is never in vain: ***Nothing is impossible with God!***
Everything God does, is a miracle. Nothing is impossible!

What happens next is the climax of Mary's life.

To understand Mary's response, we have to ask the question, ***What was Mary's background? How was she brought up? How did she grow in her faith, which enabled her to respond the way she did?***

It is also important to note, Mary consulted no one before she responded to Gabriel. Her decision and her response were **entirely** of her own free will.

Having been reminded, ***Nothing is impossible with God***, Mary replies, ***Here I am! A subject of my Lord's kingdom! I submit myself to the Word of God, the will of God and the plan of God!***

This is ***Worship in Innocence***. During Mary's time, the word *innocent* referred to anyone who was unpolluted by the world around them.

To ***Worship in Innocence***, is to worship in body, mind and spirit, without being *polluted* by the world around us.

Mary was found to be unpolluted by the world around her. She had grown up in a secure relationship with her Father in Heaven. She had learned

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not to doubt her Father. She had learned to trust Him, trust His Word and trust His promises. Her worship of God was unpolluted by the world around her. Mary worshipped in ***innocence***.

Mary may have started her journey of faith early in life, but it is never too late for any of us to learn to ***Worship in Innocence***. The more time we spend with God in His Word, our body, mind and spirit are cleansed of the *pollution* the world has poured onto us.

In the midst of the familiar Christmas narrative, Mary teaches us the value of worshipping God with an unpolluted mind and a cleansed spirit. You never know what God has in store for you to do. I cannot guarantee you win the lottery, nor can I assure you a perfect life. I would love to persuade you to take the first step to unpollute your body, mind and spirit from the influences of the world around you, and I can assure, God will use your life in amazing, miraculous and remarkable ways, for His glory!

AMEN.