

---

How you guys doing today? You guys okay?

I want to welcome everybody across all of our campuses. So whether you are joining us from North, Downtown, West, and anybody online—those of you joining us in our p.m. services—can we just give it up, those of you here at Northwest? Good to have all of you today, and Merry Christmas to all of you.

I just want to continue to encourage you to be thinking and praying about friends or family who you would invite to come with you to one of our 26 worship experiences across all of our campuses beginning December the 19<sup>th</sup>, rolling all the way through Christmas Eve. You can get some invitation cards and be inviting people to come with you to that.

I also want you to look ahead just a bit to the first Sunday of 2020, can you believe that? 2020—it's coming up. And the first weekend of the year we're going to kick things off by having some very special guests join us that day. I'm going to be having a conversation and an interview with Brian Welch and his daughter, Jennea. I don't know if any of you know who this is, but Brian is probably most known for his role in the band Korn. Big fans, I can tell.

And even if you don't know who Korn is or if you are a fan, you are going to love Brian and Jennea. They are good friends of ours and they are going to talk about their relationship with God and their relationship with one another—the mistakes they've made along the way and the things that God has been teaching them. And I don't care who you are, you're going to be encouraged by our conversation, challenged, convicted and you'll probably laugh because they are really funny.

Can I just say this? If you're looking for a good reason to invite somebody who's stayed away from church for a long time, or maybe they've politely turned you down every time you invite them (and you know who they are) invite them to come the first Sunday of 2020. It's going to be a great conversation.

Before we get rolling, I just want to announce that we have launch dates and locations for campus number five and six, alright? Anybody excited about that? Man, I am. I am excited about it. Mark it on your calendar. Sunday, January 19<sup>th</sup> we are launching our Midtown campus at the Glendale Seventh Day Adventist Church in Broad Ripple. This will be our first portable location to begin services there. We've actually got some real exciting developments behind the scenes for this campus that we'll announce at the grand opening, so you'll want to stay tuned for that.

Then the very next month on February the 23<sup>rd</sup> we're launching our Northeast campus at the Fall Creek Intermediate School in Fishers. We're just really excited about what all God is going to do in and through these campuses.

And we have more people signed for the launch for these two campuses than any other campus launches in our history. It's not too late. If you'd like to be part of these campus launches, if you live in those areas, December the 15<sup>th</sup> there is a launch team gathering. You can get all of the information at [tpcc.org/launchteam](http://tpcc.org/launchteam). We'd love to see you there.

I don't know how you are feeling right now. I'm kind of getting this sense so far today that everybody is sort of in that pre-Christmas slumber. Maybe it's just me. I don't know if you're the kind of person that, when it comes to Christmas you just can't get enough of it. How many of you are that kind of person who just can't get enough of Christmas?

Okay, now the rest of you guys you're in the category can't wait 'til it's over. You know, "It's nice while it lasts, but January 1<sup>st</sup> I kind of breathe a sigh of relief." We're all kind of feeling a little bit of that—like stress and pressure.

Regardless of which camp you fit in to, regardless of how you navigate Christmas—whether it's the can't get enough or can't wait 'til it's over, we all know that the next couple of weeks are going to be filled, potentially, with some stress and some added weight.

Here's the thing about Christmas. Christmas really kind of magnifies the season of life that you are already in. So if things are going really good, then Christmas sort of magnifies that. If things are challenging, Christmas seems to magnify that. Here's the one thing that I know regardless of how you would describe yourself, when it comes to Christmas there is no such thing as a perfect Christmas.

Ryan did a really great job last week as we kicked off this series called *The Way Back* just reminding us that even the first Christmas 2,000 years ago was far from perfect. We've sort of done our best to clean it up and make it look really picturesque in the form of the Nativity.

In fact, I brought a picture of the nativity scene that is inside our front door at our house. If you come over to our house as soon as you walk in this is what you would see in the hallway. I don't want you to get me wrong, I love everything about this. My wife pulls it out of storage every year and she sets it up and I love it, but that ain't real. And she kind of gets tired of me reminding her of that. I walk by and I'm just like, "That's not how it went down." And she's like, "Would you stop being a pastor? Would you stop being a theologian." Right? "Just enjoy the Nativity."

You look at it and it's wonderful. But come on, man. Mary and Joseph just look so calm like this is the way they wanted to start their family, in a barn. And the barn animals look so well behaved. And there is no manure. And it just looks so picturesque. And you've got the angels and the star. And I don't want to take anything away from the Nativity, but Mary and Joseph

were human beings. And you know that there would have been some stress and some strain and some anxiety.

Always around this time of the year, especially when I'm beginning to feel the weight of Christmas falling on my shoulders, I begin to think a little bit about what it would have been like to have been Mary, what would that have felt like?

You know that Mary, growing up, as a little girl living in Nazareth, she would have been very familiar with the prophecies about the coming Messiah. There are over 300 of them over hundreds of years. And you know that Mary would have sat through Sunday school lessons, sermons, and lessons about the Messiah.

There is no way though, in a million years, that she ever would have dreamed that she would have played any role in it, let alone to give birth to the Messiah, let alone to feed the Messiah and teach him how to walk and wipe his nose and change his diaper—there's no way she would have ever thought that she could have been that involved in it.

And the details of the Christmas story, at times, I think that the challenge for many of us is, even if you don't know the Bible super well, that we've heard the details of the Nativity so many times that around this time of the year it has a tendency to become sort of like white noise. It's like the real meaning of Christmas is kind of in the background, but it doesn't necessarily stir our hearts like what it once did.

But if I were to kind of give you the details of the Christmas story without any background, you'd never heard it before, it would seem incredibly unusual. In fact, if I were to come to you and say, "Hey, you've got to check out this new TV show on Netflix or Apple TV plus, it's amazing. You'd be like, "Well tell me about it."

"Well, without spoiling it, it's all about this unmarried, teenaged girl who gets pregnant and then her fiancée is thinking about bailing on her because, clearly, she's lying to him. And neither of them has very much money, they are just living in poverty and there's this evil dictator, played by Kevin Spacey—can you just see him playing that? And he puts out an order to kill all the baby boys in the land. And while on an unexpected road trip, her water breaks, there isn't a hotel reservation, she gives birth in a barn."

You would be like, "Yeah, I'll stick with reruns of the office, alright? I'm already stressed out enough this Christmas season. That's the last thing I need."

And I think to us, we look at the Christmas story and we sort of de-personalize it, and we sort of think they have it all together. And yet, Mary would have felt this incredible pressure. Not just to give birth to the Messiah, but to actually foster the kind of homelife in which Jesus, the Messiah, would grow up as a well-balanced, emotionally healthy individual so that he could become the hope of the world—don't mess this up, Mary.

I'm just kind of curious. How many parents in the room—just an honest moment of vulnerability—how many parents feel like you're just messing your kids up? And if your kids are here, you can be honest—they already know, okay?

There are so many times as a dad when I'm just like, "Man, I didn't mean to say that. I didn't mean to say it that way. I could have handled that situation way better." Or, "I could have given them that thing." Or, "What if I had gotten them that thing. Would that have given them this opportunity?" Or maybe the other way, "I've given them way too many things."

At times we feel like we are messing up our kids, because we're human beings. And forget saving for college—let's just pay for your therapy. You'll need that.

Can you imagine the added pressure that it would have been for Mary to raise the hope of the world? It had to have been difficult. Listen as Luke describes that first Christmas, when Mary finds out the role that she is going to play in it.

It starts out this way, "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy..." Now Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. She's pregnant with John the Baptist, "...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a **virgin**," the first peculiar detail, "named Mary. She was **engaged**," second peculiar detail, "to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "I always love this, "Greetings, **avored** woman! The Lord is **with you!**"

"**Confused and disturbed**," I bet she was "Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 'Don't be afraid, Mary,' the angel told her, 'for you have found **favor** with God!'" Here's what I thought of as I was studying this last week. What does it look like to not have favor with God? If this is what having favor with God gets you. Apparently, I'm the only one.

"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Now, I want you to check this out. This is Mary's response, which just makes her human. She says this. She asked this question, it's these five words that I want to hone in on in our time together today. She says, "**But how can this happen?**"

That is an incredibly great question. And I think that there is a biological aspect to his. Clearly. She says, "I am a virgin." She's meaning: I don't understand here because I've not been with Joseph. But there's also an emotional aspect to that question. Can you hear it? It's a sense that there's a: How can this happen? I'm a virgin. And then it's: How can this happen? It's the emotional side of the question.

I'm just wondering if there is anybody here today who can relate to that question. Any of you here in a season of life in which those five words could describe what you're going through and you are like, "How can this happen? I thought that our marriage was in a good place. I thought

it was in a better place, not perfect, but I thought we were doing okay. We did the marriage counseling, we started date nights, we were communicating better so how can this happen?"

Or, "I thought things were going really well at work. I got the promotion. I closed the deal. I was getting my feet underneath me so how can this happen?" Or, "I was feeling good physically. I was eating right. Getting enough sleep. I was exercising." Then the doctor called and as you hang up you're like, "How can this happen?" Or, "I thought that she was my friend." Or, "I thought that he was the one. How can this happen?" "I thought that I had a handle on that addiction," or, "that anger issue." "How can this happen?"

I think as a result of that question, many of us, especially this time of the year, we can feel a bit overwhelmed. We can feel stressed out. We can feel anxious. What I want you to be reminded of or maybe to hear for the very first time is that the power of the Christmas story is not just found in what happened. What I mean by that is this. What happened is that God became a human being and he came to live among us and pay the price for our sin—that's what happened. The power, though, is in how it happened.

That's why Luke goes to the great lengths that he goes to give us the details around this unusual first Christmas. And it is unusual. I mean, listen to it for the first time, you look at this and there are a number of ways that this could have gone down.

For starters, Mary and Joseph could have already been married. And maybe they had four or five years under their belt. And maybe they'd had one or two kids to show that they could actually do the parenting thing. And Joseph just got a promotion at work. And they just moved into a middle class, suburban neighborhood. And they had two low-mileage camels in the garage and things were going good, you know? They are on their feet. Jesus had access to all of the best schools.

He could have come that way. And if I was God, that's how I would have done it, because I would want the Messiah to have all of the best opportunities so that—you know, he's got the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's going to be the hope of the world, so let's give him the advantage. But he didn't do that. All of the details of the Nativity just seem unusual. You're left scratching your head going, "Why would God do it that way?"

How many of you have ever heard of the phrase: Jump the shark? Any of you? Three of you. It actually comes out of a television show called *Happy Days*. It was popular several decades ago. Any of you heard of *Happy Days*? More of you. Alright, there we go. The main character of *Happy Days* was this guy named The Fonz and he was supposed to be this really cool guy. He wore a leather jacket and said "Ayyy," all of the time. Check it out later.

And there was this time in the running of *Happy Days* where ratings were going down. So the writers and the producers, in order to boost ratings, created an episode in which the plot line was The Fonz was water skiing. So he's out on the lake in a leather jacket, and apparently boxers, alright? And there's this scene... It is just so stupid. This is like, "Welcome to Christmas at Traders Point." There's this scene where The Fonz jumps a shark on water skis. And it was

so stupid, that the phrase gets born right then and there that when something gets so ridiculous that you're grasping for things, it's called: Don't jump the shark.

And I don't know about you, man, I read the details of Luke and the very first Christmas and a virgin, and she's unmarried, and there's no room in the inn, so let's give birth in a barn, and Jesus' crib is a feeding trough and there comes a certain point where I'm like: "Are you jumping the shark right now?" These details just seem to be over the top. Why? And I think here's the very clear answer to why. If the Nativity would have been perfect, then you and I wouldn't have been able to relate to it, because you and I aren't perfect.

There's something about what God did 2,000 years ago—it's not just in the what happened it's the how it happened, and I don't want you to miss it. God is simply saying: You think your life is out of control? You think right now you're facing an incredible amount of stress and pressure and anxiety and worry; I am right there with you.

See here's what this sort of teaches us about the very first Christmas. The message of God's grace—in other words the gospel message—is not what we would call transactional. A transactional understanding of God's grace and love to you would be stated this way (and maybe this is how some of you grew up):

Sin separated us from God, so God sent Jesus **to tell us how to get back.**

And for many of you, maybe that's how you understood all of this. There's a word for that. It's called religion. And religion says: this is how you get back. Here's what you believe. Here's what you do. Here are the morals you have.

Listen. I'm not saying any of that stuff is wrong. I'm just saying it doesn't matter how many things you believe, it doesn't matter how many good things you do, you're never going to get back on your own. And it becomes legalistic.

See, here's what happens whenever it turns into this sort of transactional equation. Other people become the judge and jury of your beliefs, morals, and behavior. And so it turned you off. You totally missed the gospel message, which, honestly, many of you rejected. You rejected God for all of the wrong reasons. He didn't come in a transactional way.

He came in—here's the beauty of Christmas—an incarnational way. And incarnational has this subtle difference, it's a world of difference. It's simply this:

Jesus stepped into our humanity **to become our way back to God.**

And for those of you who didn't clap, you're going, "What does that mean?" It means simply this: Oftentimes I think that we think, "Well, if you just get all of your beliefs in order, then come to Jesus and he'll receive you; If you would just get all of your questions answered, then come to Jesus, he'll receive you; If you just get your act together and stop sinning and be holy and then be worthy to come to Jesus, then he'll help you."

And what God is offering... He says: No, no, no, no, no. The only thing that you really need to believe is that Jesus is my Son. You hitch your wagon to Jesus. In fact, you're going to continue to have questions, you're going to continue to have struggles, you're going to continue to deal with sin.

And as you begin to walk with Jesus, it's a progression. He begins to slowly change you from the inside out. You try to reverse that—it just turns into legalism that pushes you further and further away from God.

The Christmas story says that God became a human being, he stepped into our humanity to become our way back, to become our way back from fear and to become our way back from this word, this thing, this issue that has become so huge in our world today: Anxiety. And there would have been plenty of it in the first Christmas story.

Do you know that anxiety is the number one health related issue for women today? It's number 2 for men, get this...right behind drugs and alcohol, which I think, actually, men deal with anxiety just as much as women, but we use drugs and alcohol to cope with it.

Do you know that over 40 million of us deal with the kind of anxiety that is disruptive to our relationships, work, and personal peace? What I mean by that is that all of us deal with anxiety at different levels but over 40 million of us are dealing with it in a way that is disruptive to our lives.

Over 48 billion dollars are spent treating anxiety related symptoms. Over 70 percent of teens say that anxiety is the number one issue they face in the world today, but yet this touches every age and every demographic, as many of you know.

So you know that when the nations are surveyed, do you know which nation comes back year over year as struggling with anxiety more than any other nation in the world? Do you know? It's Switzerland. No it's not Switzerland, it's us. And that probably does not come as too much of a surprise. In fact, even more so do you know that when people from developing nations, who maybe grew up with less material possessions, when they move to the United States and get an increase in material possessions, their anxiety usually increases with them.

So we're anxious about all kinds of things. We're anxious that we won't have enough; that we won't be enough. We're anxious about our health. We're anxious about politics. We're anxious about other things that we can't control.

What is it exactly? What is anxiety? How would we sort of understand or define it and how is it different from fear? They are actually very similar, they overlap. Here's what fear is:

Fear **sees** a threat in life and **reacts** to it.

And that's actually a good thing. Fear is actually a gift. I want my kids to have a healthy amount of fear in their lives so that way they don't burn their hand on the stove or walk out into traffic or do something foolish. So fear is a good thing.

Anxiety is similar but very, very different:

Anxiety oftentimes **imagines** a threat and then gets **stuck**.

It's often been described as a tidal wave of "what ifs". So it's like: what if this happens, what if I lose my job, what if they walk out, and what if I get sick—it's sort of like, have you ever put your car in neutral and then just sat there and just revved the engine. The engine was not designed to do that. After a while it's going to overheat, it's going to break down—and neither is your mind. That's what anxiety is. It's sort of like a revving of your mind and your thoughts and your emotions and your spirit and there's no release from it. And it eventually just leads to this place of potential break down.

Now, this doesn't explain every cause of anxiety. But I do want to point out three potential triggers of anxiety in our lives, especially around this time of the year. I think that the first one is simply this:

We feel more **alone** than ever before.

You go back to Luke, chapter 1 when Mary gets this initial information and you would have known that Mary would have felt so alone in the world. As soon as the angel said: Mary, this is what is going to happen, immediately you know her thought would have been: Nobody is going to believe me. Joseph is not going to believe me. My mom and dad aren't going to believe me. This community isn't going to believe me. And she would have felt all alone in the world.

And multiple studies show that we have become individualistic and more isolated than ever before. Now, the irony of that is that we are more connected than any other era in human history via technology. Because of technology, we can see what other people are doing and where they are going and who they are doing it with all of the time. It's like an instant connectivity.

It's the side effects of that instant connectivity that are causing us to feel a bit isolated and alone. And I think here's why. We're not necessarily interacting, we're watching. And when you're watching something it just makes you feel like you're all alone. And we've sort of replaced real relationships with virtual ones and technology has replaced many of our friendships.

I think another potential trigger for anxiety is:

We feel more **insignificant** than ever.



I think Mary, when she was given this assignment, she would have thought this: I don't know if I can do it. I mean, who am I to be the mother of the Messiah? And she would have felt incredibly small. And I think many of us wonder the same thing.

Have you ever had this thought before? I know that I wrestle with this. You look around at what other people are doing—mostly through social media and you see their highlight reel, you see their edited images of themselves and have you ever thought to yourself, “Man, how did they accomplish that at their age? How did they get enough money to travel there? This is like their third vacation in two months.” And you start to compare.

Have you ever had this thought? “It seems like everybody else’s life is advancing and I feel stuck, I actually feel like I am going in reverse.”

I think another trigger to the anxiety that we are feeling is this:

We feel more **insecure** than ever before.

And you know that Mary would have felt that as well, especially when she and Joseph are on their way to Bethlehem to register for the census. They are out in the open, knowing the decree that Herod had given to kill all the baby boys and she is pregnant with a baby boy. That feeling whenever the Innkeeper said: Hey, we don't have any vacancies—how vulnerable she would have felt in that moment. And I think that many of us feel that way. It's like an ongoing sense of vulnerability.

Here's the irony. Statistically speaking, the world has never been safer than it is right now. I know it doesn't feel that way, but when you begin to look at some of the statistics they actually show. Do you know that 50 years ago the life expectancy of the average adult was 70? Today it is 83.

In the last 25 years death by cancer has dropped by 27 percent, still a big issue but the percentage has dropped significantly in the last quarter of a century. Extreme global poverty is down 65 percent in the last 20 years. Kidnappings are actually down. Terrorist attacks are actually down, especially from the 1970s. Violent crimes are down by 20 percent.

It doesn't feel that way though, does it? And I think part of the reason is because the speed at which we are processing negative information outpaces our ability to process it in a healthy way.

Some of you can remember this. I grew up in the 1980s and there was no internet, there was no 24 hour, seven days a week news channel. It was glorious. It was amazing. And the reason and the way in which you got news was either you read it in a newspaper or you caught the half-an-hour news blog on TV. There was no recording. There was no DVR. So if you missed it, you missed it. Once again—glorious. It was incredible. But now, it's constantly popping up notifications on our phone. Every time we turn on the TV it's just a constant stream and we're not able to fully process it.

So these three things right here:

Isolation  
Insignificance  
Insecurity

It's sort of like the trifecta of anxiety in our lives.

So let me say a couple of things here. First of all, if you are feeling anxious in any way it's normal. And I don't know that we hear that enough. Many of you, maybe you have these every day feelings—you're just sort of anxious about something little and it goes away—all the way to a disruptive, debilitating anxiety and everything in between. That's just normal. That's what it means to be human.

And maybe somewhere along the line you were told or led to believe that because of your anxiety there was something wrong with you, and maybe even in a church somewhere somebody said, "If you would just have more faith the anxiety would go away." Or you were told, "You know what? If you would just pray more or pray better prayers, then you wouldn't be so anxious." Or worse yet, "Well clearly you've got some sort of unconfessed sin going on in your life and you need to come clean. And when you come clean from that unconfessed sin, then God will release you from your anxiety."

And can I just tell you that that is a bunch of garbage? Can I just tell you that there isn't anything in that that is true? Now, don't misunderstand me. Do we need to work on our faith, do we need to pray, do we need to confess sin? Absolutely. But in no way does God go: Man, you don't have good enough faith so here's anxiety. In no way does God go like: Oh, man. Those prayers C-. Boom. Anxiety. Oh, you're hiding that sin? Well I'm just going to put a hefty dose of anxiety on you until you come clean. God doesn't operate that way.

To feel anxious is human. If I were to ask you, "What's more of the real you? The physical you, the physical me standing in front of you right now, what you are looking at or the emotional me, the things that you can't see, the things that I am feeling, or the spiritual me? And you would be like, what is more of the real me? And you would go, "Well, it's all three. We are emotional, spiritual, and physical beings."

So if I were to walk out on this stage today with a limp, you wouldn't have gone, "Well, Aaron. You need to have better faith. And if you would have better faith, you wouldn't be limping right now." Or, if I were to walk out here with my arm in a sling, you wouldn't say, "Aaron, you need to pray better prayers." Or, if I were to walk out here with a nasty cough, you would be like, "First of all, stay away from me." But then you would be like, "Aaron, clearly you've got some unconfessed sin in your life." You wouldn't say any of that.

And there is no significant difference between a physical injury or ailment of some kind and an emotional or mental one. It's not a sin to be sick. And even if you've been diagnosed with some

sort of mental disorder or challenge or you need some sort of medication or some sort of therapy, there's no shame. And that's just like you were diagnosed with asthma or diagnosed as a diabetic or maybe you've twisted an ankle and you need some sort of medical attention. Listen. Some of the greatest leaders in history were men and women who wrestled with anxiety and depression.

There was a season in my life—I've actually been very open about it. I've shared this with our church before. I really wrestled with anxiety and even depression for the better part of a year, if not more than a year. And here's how it manifested itself for me. Every morning at 4 a.m. my eyes would pop wide open. And as soon as I would wake up and realize that I was awake, it was as if this impending sense of doom just poured into the room. I was under a lot of pressure at work. And I was trying to keep things together. I was a young dad and trying to figure out my way. I was just under a ton of pressure and I didn't know how to deal with it.

It was as if this dark cloud just would hover over me at 4 a.m. and it would stay there all day long. And I would just feel this sense of impending doom. Zero motivation. Not sure how to navigate my way out of it. And here's how that anxiety felt.

Anxiety felt a lot like I was stuck in a **pit** with **no way out**. And maybe some of you feel that way.

What I want you to know is that, in reality, anxiety is more like a **tunnel** in which there's a **way out**.

And there are some similarities between a tunnel and a pit, but there are some massive differences. In a tunnel there is a way out. There is a way to navigate your way through it. And what I want to encourage you with today, it may not happen overnight—for me it didn't happen overnight, it was a gradual process—but the Christmas message is God subtly saying to you and me: There is a way out. The word for the season is Advent. Maybe some of you know the meaning of this:

Advent is the **arrival** of an important person and event.

But here's where there is immediate, practical application for you and me. It's that:

Advent is also an **invitation** to find your way back from the feelings of anxiety through that important person and event.

Mary appears to have done this. This is not hypothetical. We see it in the text. If you go back to Luke, chapter 1 we left Mary in her anxiety in verse 34, poor girl. And we need to go back and I want to show you verse 38.

It says this, "Mary responded, 'I am the Lord's servant. May **everything**,'" that jumps out at me. "May everything you have said about me come true."

As I was reading this last week, I was like, “Really? Everything?” If I was Mary, I think I would have tried to negotiate. I think I would have said, “May most of what you have said come true. Can we not do this part over here, because that just seems too painful. But Mary said, “May everything you said about me come true.”

Here’s the question that I have for you to think about today. What happened? What happened between verse 34 and verse 38 to come to that conclusion? And maybe the simplistic answer would be, clearly between verse 34 and verse 38 Mary worked on her faith. Or, Mary prayed better prayers. You know, she went into her prayer closet and she came out a super hero of faith. Or, clearly Mary confessed some sin between those four verses and she was able to say this.

I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe Mary did have good faith and she prayed and she confessed some sin—maybe. I don’t know. But I think it maybe even gets a little bit more practical than that. I think Mary did something between those four verses. The Holy Spirit did something within her that I think you and I can do as well. And it’s actually more practical than you think. And it’s not just wishing that anxiety would go away. It’s more substantial than that.

When I was a young man, there was a professor who was an author, preacher, professor who sort of mentored me at a distance. And when he was a younger man, before he became a professor, he worked at one of the busiest airports in the nation as an air traffic controller. This was decades ago. He worked at Chicago O’Hare airport as an air traffic controller. This was before the days of all of the technology that we have today.

He actually would describe what it was like. And he said it was a high pressure job because hundreds and hundreds of planes are on approach to the airport and as an air traffic controller, he had to make these split second decisions about which plane could land, and where, and do it in such a way that it wouldn’t cross paths with other planes so they wouldn’t run into each other. He said it was super high pressure. And he said, “I had to make a call as all of these planes were coming in and I had to control which planes could land.”

And I think that is the key. See, when it comes to feelings of anxiety you can’t control every thought that **flies** into your mind, but you do have a say as to which ones you allow to land.

And I think that’s what Mary did. I think that the feelings of confusion and stress and anxiety they were there, but between those four verses she had a say as to which ones she was going to allow to land. I think Mary was employing the wisdom of Philippians 4, verse 8 even though, for her, it hadn’t even been written yet, but to us it has been.

It says this, “Fix your,” what? “**thoughts** on what is **true**, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. **Think about** things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”

And this is not like the power of positive thinking. This isn’t just faking it ‘til you make it. This isn’t over spiritualizing things. This, actually, is a very practical verse. You want to know what it

is essentially saying? You need to think about what you think about. And just because a thought flies into your mind doesn't mean that you give it permission to land. Now:

Feelings are **true**, but they often do not tell us the **truth**.

Don't hear me say that you should deny your feelings. That's not what I am saying. Feelings are very, very true but they often do not tell us the truth. So you can be feeling something, and that feeling needs to be heard, that feeling needs to be acknowledged, that feeling needs to be empathized with and then in a spirit of wisdom, you need to ask God through the power of the Holy Spirit to help you know which feelings you need to redirect and say, "You know what? That's a very valid thought. That's a very valid fear. That's anxiety that I am feeling, but you know what? I'm not going to allow that to land."

The Greek word in the New Testament for anxiety—you know the Bible talks a ton about anxiety—the Greek word for it is: *Merimnao*. It's this idea that our thoughts are divided. They are going in a thousand different directions and we can't process and we can't focus. And one of the most powerful weapons, as it turns out, that you can use to combat debilitating anxiety (as it turns out, it weighs less than three pounds) is between your ears.

Do you know that there is a section of your brain that deals with emotion and then there's a section of your brain that deals with logic and the two need to be working in concert with each other? One doesn't over power the other one. One isn't any better. But the two actually work in partnership to give you a healthier you.

Many of you already know the science behind this and I'm not going to fully explain it in super detail, I just want to give you the gist of the picture. That part of your brain that deals with emotion is called the amygdala. And the amygdala experiences fear, anxiety, worry—whatever, and then what it does is it sends signals to another part of your brain called the prefrontal cortex. And the prefrontal cortex deals with logic. And it basically discerns: is this a legitimate fear, worry, concern or anxiety or not? In other words, the prefrontal cortex determines if this is going to land or not.

And the neurological pathway between the two needs to be really healthy. It needs to be clear. And so what we end up needing to do is we need to begin—this is what Philippians 4:8 is talking about—to fix our thoughts. That's exactly what it's talking about, because the amygdala is not objective.

The amygdala has one job and one job only—to keep you safe. That's why you need a prefrontal cortex, to help you determine and figure it out. If those neurological pathways get blocked or get redirected maybe medication is needed, maybe some sort of counseling or therapy is needed, but then also, Philippians 4, verse 8, the wisdom of it says, fix your thoughts on...

You know what it's talking about? It's saying that your mind is pliable. Your mind is like a muscle. It can be changed. There's a technical term for it. It's called neuroplasticity. It's this idea that you can actually rewire the way in which you think.

And I think that that is what Mary did between verses 34 and 38. I don't think she just closed her eyes and had wishful thinking. I don't think that she was naïve. I think that she landed back on the trust and the promises of God.

So, let me give you two extremely practical things that you can take with you to help work on how you think about what you think about. And they are just simply this:

### Replace your Bible **reading** with Bible **engagement**

Here's what I mean. These are very similar, but they are totally different. Here's what I've found in all of my years of pastoring as I've been around here. The New Year is coming. New Year's resolutions are coming. Maybe you're going to be tempted to say, "This is the year that I'm going to jump in and read the Bible all of the way through."

And you're going to read through Geneses and you're going to be so excited. And then you're going to get to Leviticus and you're out, right? You'll be like, "I don't understand this, this is hard, this is weird, I don't see how this applies to my life." And your Bible reading, be honest, has been filled with bits of stops and starts.

And can I just say that all of the Bible is equally inspired, but not all of the Bible is equally applicable. So I actually want to give you a tool that you might check out. I'm actually going to start reading this January 1. And if you want to join me, I'd love for you to join me. It's a book called *Core 52*. It's written by a friend of mine who is actually a Bible college professor and friend of mine.

And he felt this same conviction. He said, "We want to strengthen..." If you go and exercise you strengthen your core. He said, "We need to strengthen our core." What is the core of the Bible? He boiled it down. He said it was really hard to do but he boiled it down to 52 essential passages that you need to apply to your life. What is the core of what the Bible is saying? And he just takes a passage every week and he drives it down to application so that you can take it, understand it, and apply it.

I'm telling you, it's not just the Bible reading, it's the Bible engagement, meaning am I going to apply this, when am I going to apply it, and how am I going to apply it, and how am I going to talk about it? That's what is transformational and it will help you think about what you think about.

Here's the second thing:

### Invest yourself into "life giving" relationships

Ever heard people say, “You are who you spend time around.”? You want to know what kind of person you’re becoming, look at your friends. Same thing is true. This the backbone of our group ministry. We want you to gather in the room that you are in right now with a large group of people so that we can stir one another up, so that we can give each other hope and encouragement, but we also don’t want you just to slip in and slip out and just watch or observe a service.

Now if you’re just checking things out, if you’re new to the faith or you’re recovering from a bad church experience, you are welcome to take all of the time that you need to do that. But at some point, I want you to get a jersey and get in the game. I want you to be known. I want you to find yourself in life-giving relationships. Here’s what I mean by that. People who will encourage you to look more like Jesus. People who will give you godly advice and counsel.

And I don’t know how many times I’ve found myself in a slump, emotionally speaking, and I pick up the phone and I call two or three men who I know will love me enough to tell me the truth. And it begins to help me think about what I think about.

Man, we go back to the very first Christmas, it was far from perfect. My prediction is that this Christmas won’t be perfect either. But actually, I think that it’s a good thing, because I think it is an opportunity for us to invite the power of God into our less than perfect lives and ask him to do what only he can.

Father, we come to you right now and I just pray that your Spirit would be present in each one of our rooms right across all of our campuses, that you would begin to work on the hearts and the minds of everyone here today.

I pray that this message landed in some way in some lives, that this would have been something they needed to hear or maybe something they didn’t want to hear but something that they needed to hear and they would feel encouraged to know that there is a way out, there is a way back from feelings of debilitating anxiety.

So, God, we just want to pause and take a few moments to put our trust in you and to ask you to do, to invite you to do, what only you can. We ask this in Jesus’ name: Amen.