

The Fourth Sunday Of Advent

December 20, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

How was it that Mary could be so bold and courageous in accepting God's will for her? How was it, given the fact that Mary knew this holy pregnancy would change her life quite drastically, that she was able to give praise to God for this gift? How was it that Mary didn't freak out to the fact that she was going to have to try and convince Joseph that the Angel Gabriel already had come to her, and that the Holy Spirit was going to come upon her, causing her to become pregnant?

The challenges that Mary was going to have to face because of this pregnancy were enormous. Not only was she facing the potential for public ridicule and condemnation, but in reality, Mary was only 12 years old! When I was 12, I certainly didn't feel mature enough to marry and have a family! For those wondering, when a woman reached 12 years of age in Mary's society, they were considered marriageable and at the decisive age of responsibility. Still, to be 12 years of age and accept God's gift of a child so willingly is quite extraordinary.



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Mary was also a member of the community in Nazareth, and even with her pregnancy, there were communal roles and expectations that Mary would have to fulfill. Nazareth was a fishing community. Mary would have been expected to help clean and gut the fish caught each day. I can just imagine how much Mary's back must have hurt having to collect water from the well each day. I'm also sure it must have been quite hard on Mary's pregnant body to help with the planting of the fields and harvest. Of course, there was also the fact that childbirth in Mary's time was life-threatening and dangerous. Yet, with all this in mind, Mary still willingly accepted God's call for her to be the mother of Jesus.

I believe the answer to Mary's faithfulness is found in the Magnificat. The Magnificat are those wonderful words that Mary proclaims when she visits her relative Elizabeth. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who [revere] him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever," (Luke 1;46-55 NRSV).

It is clear through this proclamation of Mary that she truly believes that God remains faithful to the covenant promise to her and to all of Israel, and that the promise will be fulfilled through this holy child about to be born. Mary truly believes that nothing is impossible for God, and that she can endure anything life throws her way because she truly believes that God is with her; that she has indeed found favor with God.

The faithfulness of 12-year-old Mary is an amazing thing to behold. How many of us would be able to show such faithfulness were we to receive the angel Gabriel, bringing us a message from God? Would we believe in God's call to us with such boldness and courage? Do we believe that nothing is impossible for God? Do we believe that we have found favor with God and that God is with us?

I can imagine that, as we approach the darkest day of the year, and as we continue to endure the pain and anguish of living in a global pandemic, especially over the Christmas holiday, that many of us are having a hard time feeling as blessed by God as Mary felt. I can only imagine the doubt that creeps in as we hear news of the rising death counts, the overwhelmed hospitals with no more beds available to treat patients, and the uncertainty of when we will be able to receive the new vaccine, that it is hard for us to believe that God is being merciful towards us. And how can we trust that we have found favor with God when we have to endure the hardship and despair of not getting to be with our families for Christmas?



Ah, but Christmas is the gift that reminds us that we have indeed found favor with God, for the proclamation to Mary is the beginning of the good news that God is with us. What closer way is there for us to be connected to God than through the Word become flesh! Mary's faithfulness made it possible for God's promise to be fulfilled. Mary knew that, if she accepted God's gift, it would indeed be the very thing that would lead to a world transformed by God's almighty power, the power of love, grace, and mercy.

And now, because of Mary's faithfulness, we have witnessed through our reading, hearing, teaching, singing, and liturgy the story of Immanuel, who indeed transformed the world through his ministry as well as his death and resurrection. We know that, no matter how broken our world becomes, God's promise of redemption and reconciliation has been completed through Christ Jesus, as he has shown us that not even death can stop God from claiming us as beloved and giving us eternal life. Immanuel is always a part of us because we were tied to his death and resurrection through baptism; therefore, we know that because Christ lives, we too shall live on that great and glorious last day.

The story of Mary's faithfulness to God's will is a reminder to us that we too have found favor with God, and that there is nothing in this world that can eternally destroy us. It is also a reminder to us that the dark night will not last, that the pandemic will not be the end of humanity, and there will come a time soon when we can see our loved ones in person once again.

After all, in just a few days, we will again celebrate the joy of Christ's coming, forever reminding us that nothing is impossible for God, and that the joy of Mary is our joy. For Immanuel does indeed scatter the proud, bring down the powerful who abuse their power, feed the physically and spiritually hungry with good things, send the greedy away empty, and show love, grace, and mercy to all.

Amen.



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