

Advent 4, December 20, 2020, Sermon

(Luke 1:26-38; Ps 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Sam 7:1-11, 16; Rom 16:25-27)

The holy gospel according to Luke, the 1st chapter (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV)

In the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy) ***the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The 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. And 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then 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.***

This is the gospel of our Lord.

Today's gospel is known as the *Annunciation*, Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she'll become the mother of God's own Son. You've heard the story, many times. Let's look at some of the historical details—the *context*—and maybe you'll get some new insight into just *how very odd* that whole situation was.

In Bible times in Israel, a girl was the property of her father. He controlled her life completely. At age twelve or thirteen she would be promised to a man selected by her father. The relationship was legally binding after the betrothal, the engagement. If the groom died before the wedding, the girl would be considered a widow.

For the first year after the betrothal, the bride-to-be remained with her parents. Then the groom would come and take her to his home, where the wedding celebration would last an entire week.

Page 2

At the time of Gabriel's visit to her, Mary was betrothed to Joseph. It's possible they'd never met. They certainly had never been alone with each other.

Gabriel announces that Mary is *avored*, or *blessed*, by God. God has chosen her from among all the Jews to be the mother of his Son! Young Mary, unwed, uneducated, poor, living in an insignificant town at the very edge of Israel, was to become great.

If that's what it means to be *blessed*, do we really want God's favor? Mary risks the wrath of her betrothed, who will know full well *he* isn't the father of this baby.

And she risks being *stoned* for adultery. The betrothal is legally a marriage, but everyone knows she hasn't been with Joseph in any sense of the word. The penalty for adultery was stoning. From Mary's perspective, this can't seem like a very good deal.

Another consideration is more theological, or at least more *religious*. If God's Son is going to be born at all, wouldn't it be better for him to be born to high-ranking, wealthy parents who could provide him with all the finest things?

Shouldn't he at least be born in Jerusalem, the city of God? That's where the Temple is. That's where everyone worships. If this baby will grow up to be known as the *Son of the Most High*, shouldn't he really have a more promising beginning?

And besides that, isn't this all just plain *wrong*? We know Jesus is the Son of God, but as the son of *Mary*, he's going to spend his life doing all sorts of things *God can't do*.

First, he'll be born. He'll grow up. He'll party at a wedding, and dine with sinners and tax collectors. He'll weep at the death of a friend. He'll suffer mental and emotional anguish, as well as physical agony. He'll die the death of a criminal, feeling abandoned by God.

And that, finally, is the very reason it had to be the way it was. What other religion or faith in the world has ever worshiped a God who not only *knows*, but has actually *lived* everything *we* experience?

Our God loves us so deeply, he himself entered into our life in the form and being of his Son. This life we live, so full of selfishness, greed, violence, injustice, and corruption—this is the life into which Jesus, *God-in-the-flesh*, chose to be born.

That's why Gabriel's announcement to low-born Mary, truly a nobody, is an announcement of *hope* for humankind. God hasn't abandoned us to the consequences of our own sinfulness. God himself has come, in Jesus, to be our deliverer.

Mary's song of praise is called *The Magnificat*, the *magnifying*, or revealing, of God's goodness to her, and to us. There are more musical settings for these words than almost any other passage in scripture—our hymn of praise was one. God has used the most humble of people, Mary, to be his most exalted servant. Then as now, God chose the lowly and not the high and mighty.

God has reversed everything: who's in and who's out; who's up and who's down. Those we see as winners are really the losers. Mary's song reveals how the world has gotten everything wrong in the kingdom of God on earth.

Our world has always focused on what's *visible*. In the ways of the world, blessed are the *beautiful*. Blessed are the *rich*, the *successful*, the *secure*. Blessed are the *powerful*, the *crafty*, the *scheming* who accomplish their own goals.

Some thirty years after the Annunciation, a wandering rabbi will come along and turn that upside down, for all who will listen: *Blessed are the poor*. *Blessed are the meek*, *blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness*. Blessed are those who live for justice, for mercy and compassion and steadfast love.

Can you sing Mary's song of praise to God? Can you celebrate the blessings of humility, loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind? Can you love your neighbor as yourself? Can you do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

Advent is a time of preparation. Imagine that Jesus is actually coming to live *with you*. What do you want to do to prepare? What do you need to change? What will it take for your soul to sing, with Mary, about the glories and upside-down blessings of God?

Page 4

I invite you to choose *one* way you might prepare for the coming of Jesus, both baby and King. What one thing can you do this Advent to make it easier for God to be a part of your conscious living? Maybe you could spend a few more minutes each day in prayer or devotional (even scripture!) reading. Or reach out to someone who's hurting, or take a step for social justice.

Sit with these ideas. Don't rush into a pre-Christmas rush of Advent housecleaning of your soul. But meditate on these things (as Mary "pondered all these things in her heart" in Luke 2:19), and let the Spirit suggest a response. Then, for these final days of Advent, commit to preparing a way, making a straight path for God to enter your life in a new way.

As we read last week from I Thessalonians (5:24), **"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful, and he will do this!"**

Thanks be to God!!