

TEXT: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month, 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 be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob 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 upon 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 barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. – NIV84

Prayer of the Day:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the burden of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel. Alleluia. (Matthew 1:23 cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

How good are you at keeping your promises? What if we asked the people closest to you? Would they say that you are a promise keeper or a promise breaker? How do you personally feel about promises? Are you relatively comfortable with them, both in the making and in the keeping or do promises make you anxious because they nail you down and force you into things? It turns out how we view promises has an awful lot to do with our overall promise-keeping, our faithfulness.

What does any of this have to do with the Fourth Sunday of Advent and the annunciation to Mary? Quite a bit actually. Consider Paul's Words in our second lesson. He tells us that "*mystery hidden for long ages past* (Romans 16:25)" is revealed in the Word and fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Or to say it another way, all of God's promises stand fulfilled in Jesus. In a very real way, we have proof that God is a promise keeper as Gabriel visits Mary and the dominoes of God's promises start to fall in fulfillment. Shall we dig into the words Gabriel spoke just nine months before the manger, before all the events unfolded which we will celebrate in only hours from now?

Imagine, what it must have been like for Israel, watching, waiting, preparing for centuries, through war, deportation, and subjugation. Imagine the long wait after the promise that David's

throne would endure forever just to see it topple from palace. Imagine the anxiousness with which those early Israelites must have poured over the Words of God in the days of Roman occupation and tyranny. And then Mary, a descendent of David, a virgin engaged to Joseph gets a visit. Yes, that's putting it lightly. It's an angel, Gabriel, sent from God with the message all of Israel had been longing for but which is given to her. "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*"

Mary is troubled and rightfully so. She knows who she is and what she is. No, she is not a harlot, like Rehab one of her descendents, although she will be called one because of the miracle God is about perform. However, she knows full well this is not because she is more deserving of this greeting, the words which illustrate her reaction betray that fact. She is surprised, troubled and wonders what this is all about, why would an angel speak to a sinful human being in such a way? The angel's next words continue to show the grace of our God even as it announces the fulfillment of the age-old promise of the Messiah.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Even Mary's troubled heart is calmed by the knowledge of Jesus. And note the answer to her mind full of unexpressed questions and troubles. How can this be? Why are you here? How can you greet me in this way? "It's all because of the child God is going to place within your womb. He is God, the Son of David who will reign forever. God and man in perfect packaged form for you (more on that this Christmas season). You will name him JESUS." The angel of the Lord explains the name to Joseph in the book of Matthew, even as he calms his fears about a strangely pregnant fiancé, *"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:20-21)."*

At some point in my life I learned the phrase attributed to American pop-culture, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." So it is that if we are offered a great price on something, we want to know, "What's wrong with it?"

Part of the reason that we marvel at Mary is that we see none of this in her. Oh sure, she asks about the logistics of this as the angel makes the announcement but she doesn't doubt. Instead she humbly bows to the will of the Lord, *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."*

Yes, here in Nazareth in Galilee the ancient promise first heard by Adam and Eve as they cower in fear in the presence of holiness, now knowing what it meant to have holiness lost finds it's fulfillment. Yes, here in a humble woman who has likely never stepped foot in a palace, God will place the world's greatest King. Here in a sinner, in the dusty desert the Savior of the world will miraculously be placed in a womb, God will grow in wisdom and in stature. The promise is fulfilled.

Dear friends as the anticipation of Christmas builds to a breaking point, it is this same grace, which makes it possible for our God to come to us, for us to declare that just like Mary, He is with us. There is nothing special, extra holy, or wonderfully grand about us. Like Mary, we stand bewildered at the announcement. Why would God choose to come into this world filled with sin and sinners like us? Why subject Himself to growing in wisdom and stature as a man? Why the

cross, why the grave, why any of it. The angel's announcement provides the answer, *you are to give him the name Jesus*. A name which literally means the LORD saves!

You've all been there at some point in your life, standing beside Mary. Oh, the angel Gabriel didn't walk into the room and announce that you would be with child and that this child would be the Savior of all people of all time. The announcement that comes to us is far more believable. Perhaps God entered into your history through the voice of a doctor announcing an illness. Perhaps in His infinite wisdom, He called someone close to us home to heaven and away from suffering. Perhaps, He even spoke to us through the voice of His servants, called to public ministry or ushered in through friendships and acquaintances, telling us to mind His Word and avoid all that might be sin. In all things, He promises He is working for good either for our own or for the good of His kingdom.

What is your reaction to all of these things? In trial and tribulation, do we humbly bow to the will of God, even when we don't necessarily understand it all? I know this isn't always my reaction. If it's too good to be true, it probably is, and if it stinks well, that's because it stinks and I'm going to tell you and everyone who will listen. Is that faith or is that doubt?

Yes, every year as we draw near to Christmas, I marvel at Mary because of the faith she displays as the angel announces this miracle. The Greek words even bear this out a bit. The word we usually think of for words and speech is λόγος (logos). It carries the idea of a message with a clear meaning. However, as Mary speaks to the angel the word changes to ῥῆμα (rymma) which while often simply a synonym for logos can sometimes connote a sound, the full meaning of which is not entirely grasped or understood. Mary can't work out the equation in her head of how she, a virgin, will conceive, nor how the Spirit will accomplish all of that. Interestingly enough, Martin Luther would have us believe it just occurred as the powerful words were spoken and like during the days of creation, as God spoke so also it came to be. But even though it may not all make perfect sense, she believes.

How? Well the angel has already given the answer at the beginning. It was there in that strange greeting that befuddled and troubled Mary. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." There it is again. This faith is not something for which we fall down and adore Mary but once more something for which we fall down and worship God. Mary is a sinner, a human being just like the rest of us. However, God has been with Mary in His Word. Words, not only spoken by the angel, but by rabbis in synagogues, in truths painted with the blood of sacrifices and portrayed in festival celebrations, that Word has been at work strengthening faith so that this young woman will bow her head and her body to the will of her God. "*I am the Lord's servant,*" Mary answered. "*May it be to me as you have said.*"

So here we are. It's the last weekend of the season of Advent. The four candles stand before us burning with their distinctive truths of readiness, repentance, rejoicing, as Christ is now revealed to us, are you ready? Ready to celebrate His first coming in a stable in Bethlehem even as you wait for his return in glory with angels in tow? Are you ready to peer into the manger and see it? All of God's promises fulfilled for you in Christ Jesus! For God so loved the world ... that means you too. It is by grace you (You dear Christian) have been saved, through faith and this not of yourselves If I go and prepare a place for you (you again) then I'll come back and take you with me that you may be where I am. The King Shall Come Just as God promised and dear friends ... He's got a perfect track record. Amen!