

Advent IV, December 24, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16. Romans 16:25–27. Luke 1:26–38, 47–55.

26 In 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, favoured 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 favour 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 for ever, 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.

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

The angel Gabriel visits Mary with these words and thus begins the Christmas story.

The angel's message from God is also for you and me today. "Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you; Jesus Christ will be born in you."

+ + +

Mary was a young woman, probably from a good, if humble, home, engaged to Joseph, a carpenter. But then, Gabriel, old spirit, angel who lives with God, wrenches Mary out of her comfort zone.

What may have crossed her mind? Old prayers such as, "O Lord our God, we stumble as those lost in the night." "We live burdened by the sorrows of the world." Or simply, "HELP!"

+ + +

We all have comfort zones – our job or retirement income if we're lucky, our family if we're blessed, our home, our routines, our relationships, our church.

It doesn't take much to wrench us out of these comfort zones! Unexpected encounter with a policeman or with an armed stranger. Troubles at school. A huge medical bill. A death. A sick child or spouse. A fall. A broken relationship. Dementia. Hearing news of yet another storm, fire, shooting, or war. News of injustice, racial inequality, continued awareness of the incredible difficulty of bridging the gaps between groups of people....we might put in Mary's words: the "lowly, those who fear God, and the hungry" set opposite the "rich, the mighty, the proud."

Mary is wrenched out of her comfort zone by the appearance of an angel and then by the message of the unexplainable pregnancy.

But the angel says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." and "Do not be afraid." Easy for the angel to say. Gabriel will return to God, but Mary will be left in Nazareth to face her parents, the neighbors, a disappointed fiancé.

The angel's message troubles Mary. What, how, why me? Why? She surely sang, but only after she dealt with such questions.

These are questions we ask too.

What does this situation mean? How can I face this pain, this illness, this divorce, this death? Can I cope with this unexpected change in my life? Can I really do what is being asked of me – on the job, here at church, in my relationship, as a parent, grandparent, caregiver, spouse? Can a system of justice and peace exist? Can I bring forth the gift of life that God has planted in me? What is with this inner lowliness / this loneliness that gnaws at me?

Along with the fears of having no answer or answering NO, come the hopes that push us to answer YES or to continue the struggle. Fear set against hope. For this struggle there is the power of the most high. Nothing will be impossible with God. And perhaps there is a relative or friend who will understand.

+ + +

Mary's feet hurt. Her stomach churned with morning sickness as she made her way across the hills to her old cousin Elizabeth's house. She'd forgotten how long this walk would be. But she remembered that Elizabeth had always loved her even when she felt lowly, less than lovable. This trip carried risk, for Elizabeth's husband was a priest, who could choose to enforce the laws to stone unwed mothers.

As Mary approached Elizabeth and Zechariah's house, Elizabeth came running out to hug her – and when she looked into Mary's eyes, she saw the pain, the struggle. "It's so hard to explain," said Mary; "then don't try," said Elizabeth.

They sat and talked and talked and cried and laughed. Elizabeth claimed her baby – yes, at her age! – her baby had kicked powerfully when Mary hugged her. That baby would grow up to be John the Baptizer.

"The baby I carry was glad to see you, Mary, and your baby is a sign of hope." "Yes," said Mary, "but I am so torn. Sometimes I am full of joy, other times full of fear. It's like I'm two people."

Elizabeth reminded Mary of the old song of their foremother Hannah who bore the unexpected and deeply desired baby Samuel.

'My heart exults in the Lord;' Hannah sang, 'my strength is exalted in my God.'

⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵ Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

⁸ [The Lord] raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.' (I Samuel 2:1,4,5,8)

We understand this song to say, "God's strength is the love that brings justice and peace to all nations. God's love offers life to the poor and the meek who are raised from the ground where they suffer." Mary's song will echo this world-turned-upside-down as God had intended it. Hungry, fed; powerful and proud, scattered; lowly, raised up. Young Mary and old Elizabeth will gift the world with their unexpected, unlikely babes.

Elizabeth looked into Mary's dark, young eyes and saw strength, courage and faith. "The children we carry, she said, "are God's gifts of hope. Even when everything seems so painfully wrong, can you believe that God sings God's song through you?"[\[1\]](#)

+ + +

God sends us that angelic message today.

In one of the Christmas letters I received this year, a friend, who had a particularly tough year, wrote, "I still have hope. Don't ask me why or how; all I know is that I can still feel hope buried deep within, a glimmer of light that cannot be destroyed, a spark that has sustained me through all the tough times before and will continue to do so now....I...pay attention to that hope...and let it guide me through the chaos around us."

It's an angelic message in a dark month, a dark period of history, on a day that represents the return of the light. A holy day that celebrates the "Light that the darkness does not overcome."

"Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you." As we struggle, God changes our fears to faith: faith to trust God above all, in spite of all, maybe because of all. There is, after all, no thing, no ruler, no one else to trust! And nothing will be impossible with God.

Mary's fear becomes faith; her dread becomes anticipation; her despair becomes hope. God moves her fiancé Joseph to marry and protect her. Come due date, they will find a place – however humble – to bring the Creator of the World to life in harsh, tough circumstances. Her baby will

suffer and die, but first will grow up and heal and feed and teach and then will rise again. Her baby Jesus -- full of the power of the most high -- will call us brother and sister and will promise to be with us always – even to the end of the world.

Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The Christ-child grows within Mary. She will become a good mother. Her heart will be pierced, but she will also witness the first Easter morning.

Mary, a humble teenager; shepherds, virtual outcasts of society; foreign astronomers unfamiliar with biblical prophecies and Israel's politics; and you and I, motley crew that we are – people with doubts and fears, hopes and dreams, lowly feelings, hungry hearts, grieving souls, joyful smiles – none of us in this wondrous story has anything to recommend us for such glory – and yet, still outside our comfort zones, God reaches down and is born again in us in the birth of Jesus!

When you are called out of your comfort zone, may an angel call you into an honest struggle with what life puts before you. This struggle may call for some self-examination and repentance, but may the Holy Spirit lead you through that struggle to trust God anew and to receive the peace which the world cannot give. May you, like Mary, carry the Christ-child within you through Christmas, into the new year, and always. For in spite of appearances or expectations, HIS promised kingdom of justice AND peace will have no end. Amen.

[1] Adapted from Ralph Milton, "The God who sang the song through you." in Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God? Wood Lake Books, 1995. www.joinhands.com