

**+ Luke 1:26-38 + Are You Ready Yet? + 4th Sunday in Advent + 21 December 2008 +**

Only three more shopping days until Christmas! Isn't it hard to believe that on Wednesday we'll begin our Christmas celebrations? Didn't we just finish off the last leftovers from Thanksgiving? Where did Advent go?

Christmas almost seemed to sneak up on us this year, though it's the same time as always. All the hustle and bustle seem to get more frantic. The troubles with the economy make it seem more stressful. All the end-of-the-year activities and parties and shopping and what not seem to pile on higher and quicker this year with the snow. We've likely given ourselves little time to prepare our hearts this Advent for the reason for the season.

So **ARE YOU READY YET?** Have you prepared for Christ's coming? Have you prepared your heart and home for the celebration of his birth and for his return in glory on the Last Day? We could all shake our heads with a rather guilty "no". So what can we do with so little time? Let's travel to a poor, little home in a backwater town called Nazareth. God has a big announcement to make and a royal Christmas gift to give. Let's pause for a moment to ready our hearts to receive the coming Christ anew as Advent comes to a close.

Now in one sense Mary wasn't ready yet either. She had probably always dreamed of being a mother, but she had no real reason to expect that to happen before she was married. She was still a virgin. In her mid-teens, as was common, Mary was engaged to a local carpenter named Joseph. Back then, that was considered a binding legal marriage with all the responsibilities and none of the privileges until the wedding feast a year later. Mary had every reason to believe she would soon enough be a mother, but in a sense, she wasn't ready for God's big announcement.

Mary's mix of surprise and fear and confusion when an angel named Gabriel paid her a visit one day is not surprising. You can understand why she **"was greatly troubled"** when the angel said to her, **"Greetings, O highly favored one! The Lord is with you."** That doesn't happen every day! Still Mary didn't respond with doubt. In fact, she was a very thoughtful young woman. Mary **"wondered what kind of greeting this might be."**

If nothing else, it was quite strange to be called **"highly favored"** by an angelic messenger from God himself. Her earthly situation didn't seem **"highly favored"** by any stretch of the imagination, but Gabriel started explaining what made her so **"highly favored"**. He said, **"The Lord is with you...Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found grace/favor with God."**

Mary, a faithful Old Testament believer, would've recalled similar greetings given to heroes of faith like Moses, Joshua, and Jeremiah. God's gracious presence was with her, as it is with all believers, but the Lord had an even bigger announcement to make to her. **"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."**

How does Mary react to this big announcement from the Lord? Surely she couldn't have been ready for such a big change in her life, but yet to a certain extent she was. As a faithful believer in the promised Messiah, Mary was ready to receive whatever came from the Lord. In this case, that meant being the mother of the promised Messiah.

Now Mary did wonder how that could be possible. She asked, **"How will this be...since I am a virgin?"** Logically and scientifically, it was impossible for a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son without a human father, so Gabriel explained what would happen as he was able. **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."** Then he added, **"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. For nothing is impossible with God."**

Mary simply responded, **"I am the Lord's servant...May it be for me as you have said"** or literally, **"May it be for me according to your word, even though I don't fully understand it."** Isn't it remarkable that nowhere in this account does Mary exhibit any doubt or unbelief or even a sense of self-righteousness because she was so **"highly favored"** to be the mother of her Savior-God? By faith she was simply ready to receive whatever came from the lips of her gracious God, even if she didn't fully understand it all.

Are we as ready for the big announcement of Christ's coming? Here we are in the final days of Advent, and few, if any of us, would readily admit we are prepared. Our focus is pulled in so many different directions the closer we come to Christmas, so how can we be ready for the coming of our Lord? We can't be prepared with more frantic doing. We can't be prepared with a focus on what we have done or what we promise to do. We can't be prepared with some kind of payback for what Christ comes to bring. To do any of that would simply

leave us unprepared not only for the celebration of Christ's first coming, but even more so for his return in glory to judge.

So how do we get ready for Christ's coming? We go to the source of all God's promises—his grace and favor in Christ. We go to God's grace and favor expressed in his Word, where our hearts are condemned with his killing Law, but restored with the saving good news of the lowly Christ-Child, who came prepared as God and Man to save you and me from our spiritual unpreparedness. It was this same Word that prepared Mary to receive whatever came from her Lord, even if she did not understand it all.

We also go to God's grace and favor poured out in the waters of Holy Baptism, where our sinful, unprepared natures are crucified with Christ and a new self arises, made holy in the blood of Christ and ready to receive all God's promises with confident trust. To those life-giving waters, we daily return to drown that sinful nature and receive again God's promise of forgiveness through Jesus. We go to God's grace and favor laid out for us in the feast of his Holy Supper, where Christ blesses us by giving us his holy body and blood with bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins, strength for our new lives and for the assurance of our salvation. Through the Word and Sacraments, those blessed means by which God grants us his favor, we are able to get ready for Christ's coming amidst the frantic times in which we live.

Even as Advent comes to a close, we gather around those means of grace and prepare our hearts for God's big announcement of the coming "**Son of the Most High**"—a royal Christmas gift God presents to you and me and the whole world. Are we ready to receive that too?

When the angel made God's big announcement, he used language Mary would've understood. She knew her Old Testament. Like those before her, she, too, looked forward to the coming Messiah. She knew the prophecies about him, like those of Isaiah, who had foretold the coming of the King, "**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.**"

God's promise was, therefore, made to Mary in the language of the prophets. "**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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.**" This child conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb would be the King of kings, who would rule over God's people in their hearts and lives through faith in him.

Besides this royal description of her Messiah-son, Mary was also to name her little son, "**Jesus**", which literally means, "He saves". Many Jewish children had been named Yeshua or Jesus to remind them of this coming Savior. Now she and Joseph would get to give that name to the Savior. That was God's royal Christmas gift to humanity—a Savior who would fulfill all the promises of the Old Testament, who would come to crush the serpent's head, who would come to bless all nations, who would come to serve and suffer in our place, who could come to destroy the sting of death forever.

Mary needed that royal Christmas gift from God as much as we do. Mary was not chosen because she was "full of grace", but purely because of God's grace. There was nothing in her to merit such favor from the Lord, because she was a sinner. Mary readily acknowledged that as she later sang, "**My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...**" It was pure grace that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus and it was pure grace that God chose you and me to be members of his family. It was pure grace that God even gave his royal Christmas gift—his Son, our Savior. It was pure grace that placed Christ in Mary's womb and eventually on a cross for your sins and mine. It was pure grace that brought you to the font to bring you into God's family. It is pure grace that God still strengthens you through his Word and Meal. It was even pure grace that brought you here today. No matter how many or great the gifts you and I get or give this Christmas, none will take our breath away like the royal Christmas gift God wrapped in our own humanity when he gave his Son for us!

Yes, there are only three days until Christmas, but we can still be ready for Christ's coming! Pause for a moment and say, "Wow!" at God's big announcement and his royal Christmas gift for you. As you make your final Advent preparations, keep an ancient prayer in your heart and on your lips, "**O Emmanuel, our King and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, O Lord our God.**" God's answer is coming soon and it's time to get ready! Amen.