

Luke 1:26-38 + The King Comes in Grace + Series: Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 4th Sunday of Advent + 24 December 2017

When it comes to preparing for Christmas, you usually have certain expectations. They vary from person to person, family to family, and congregation to congregation, but there are always expectations. For example, what kind of Christmas tree do you put up—one bought from a lot, one cut down in the woods, or one you pull out of a box and assemble each December? What ornaments and decorations do you “have to” put up every year? There are certain ornaments on our tree that once hung on the Christmas trees of my parents or my wife’s parents, while there are others that have to be put out on the tree every year because they have special meaning to us. Are there any particular foods—certain unique treats or snacks or delicacies or dishes that you only eat at Christmas time, but you eat them every Christmas?

As a pastor planning for our Christmas worship services, there are certain hymns and carols that we sing in some fashion every Christmas. Many are beloved and familiar to our members, while a couple others happen to make their way in there because they’re beloved by your pastor. There are certain portions of Scripture, like Luke 2 and John 1, that you expect to hear at Christmas. So whether it’s trees or decorations or food or music or Scripture, Christmas preparations always bring along certain expectations. That’s why when things take an unexpected turn, you feel such an emotional swing from disappointment to joy.

When an angel named Gabriel brought a message from God to a young Jewish virgin named Mary, things could not have taken a more unexpected turn. Life was going pretty much as expected for Mary. Joseph had finally popped the question, and Mary was getting ready for her new home and life. She was making plans for her wedding, but also had responsibilities to her family. She had probably dreamed of becoming a mother someday, but she had no real reason to expect that to happen before she got married. She was still a virgin in her mid-teens. Back then, being engaged was a binding legal marriage with all of marriage’s responsibilities and none of the privileges until the wedding feast a year later. Motherhood was not on Mary’s mind.

Then out of the blue, her life took a completely unexpected turn. An angel with a message from God appeared to her. **“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”** Mary had never received a greeting like that. Perhaps she wondered how she could be described as **“highly favored.”** After all, she was just a young woman engaged to a working man. Yeah, she was descended from ancient King David, but his family had stopped ruling Israel 600 years before. There were plenty of others who were also descendants of David. She belonged to an ordinary Jewish family in a town so insignificant that the Old Testament prophets didn’t bother mentioning it. So why her?

Even though she was **“greatly troubled”** at the angel’s words (and who wouldn’t be!), Luke tells us that she **“wondered what kind of greeting this might be.”** She was a thoughtful, young woman who had also paid attention when God’s Word was taught. So she would’ve recalled similar greetings to great Old Testament heroes of faith like Moses or Joshua or Jeremiah, but this was a unique greeting full of God’s unexpected grace. The angel didn’t address her as **“Mary, Queen of Heaven”** or **“Mary, Gate of Heaven”** or some other title that made Mary out to be something she never was. Instead, the angel addressed her as **“the one upon whom God continually bestows his grace”** or better **“Mary, Regular Recipient of God’s Undeserved Love!”**

Mary had done nothing to deserve such a gloriously gracious title or the gracious assurance that the Lord was with her. For a young virgin mother, who would become the target of local gossip, who would make a 70-mile trek to Bethlehem when she was in her final trimester, how encouraging to know that her Heavenly Father would always be with her.

...But Mary was still troubled. Her head was spinning at this unexpected turn of events. Why was this angel from the Lord visiting her? The angel’s reason for being there—the good news he had to share—wouldn’t just rock Mary’s life forever, but would change our world forever. The King of Kings, the Messiah, God’s Anointed One, the Savior of the world was coming!

God had sent his messenger to this young virgin who was already receiving his grace through faith in her coming Savior. She was already a recipient of his gracious promise to be with her always, but you also see God’s grace in how tenderly, how gently, how kindly the angel deals with Mary’s uncertainty. **“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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.”** The King of Kings, the Messiah, the Savior of the world was coming in a most unexpected way!

When it comes to your Christmas celebrations, you have certain expectations. The same is true for the arrival of a king or president. You expect pomp and circumstance. You expect formality and precision down to the smallest detail for food, music, decorations, and presentation. You expect an impressive show of power and might. You expect the most impressive response possible that can express the greatest honor. You expect big, showy, public displays recognizing the ruler's grand and glorious entrance.

You don't expect humility or lowliness or poverty. You don't expect major arrivals announced to a single person in a private setting with no paparazzi clicking away or reporters barking questions. You don't expect the grand entrance or glorious arrival to happen in an ordinary setting among ordinary people away from the halls of power. Yet that's what happened when Jesus arrived. That's what happened when the King finally arrived.

He came not in glory, but in humility. He came not in pomp, but in lowliness. His arrival was not announced in the crowded temple courts in Jerusalem or in the bustling halls of power in Rome. His arrival was not announced in Times Square in NYC or Red Square in Moscow or Trafalgar Square in London or Tiananmen Square in Beijing, but in the privacy of an ordinary home in an ordinary village to an ordinary virgin engaged to be married to an ordinary working man. The King came not with the glorious shouts of the archangel nor with a sky filled with the heavenly hosts. The King came when a holy angel shared with a virgin, who needed a Savior, this simple, gentle message: the King comes not in glory, but in grace. That's so remarkable! The King comes in grace.

As an Old Testament believer, Mary understood what the angel meant that this child conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb would be the King of kings, who would rule over God's people not on a throne, but in their hearts through faith in him. His name would reflect how he would be the embodiment of God's grace. Mary was to name her little boy, "**Jesus**," which means, "*He saves.*"

Now many Jewish boys had been named Jesus to remind them of the coming Messiah, but Mary and Joseph would have the privilege of giving that name to their Savior. In that little bundle of joy would be God's royal Christmas gift to humanity—a Savior who would come in grace to crush the serpent's head, who would come in grace to bless all nations, who would come in grace to serve and suffer in our place, who would come in grace to destroy the sting of death forever.

Mary needed that grace as much as we do. Mary was not chosen because she was "*full of grace*," but because of God was full of grace. Mary readily acknowledged her need for that Savior in her womb when she later sang, "***My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...***" (Luke 1:46-47) It was pure grace that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus. It was pure grace that God chose you and me to be members of his family. It was pure grace that God gave us his Son to be our Savior. It was pure grace that placed Jesus in Mary's womb and eventually put him 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. The King came to bring that grace to you!

Now Mary did wonder how this could be possible. She asked, "***How will this be...since I am a virgin?***" Logically, it was impossible for a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son without a human father. So the angel explained what would happen. "***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. 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 according to your word, even though I don't fully understand it.***" Isn't it remarkable that nowhere 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? That trust also came from God's grace. By faith Mary was simply ready to receive whatever came from God's lips, even if she didn't fully understand it. She didn't know that she was about to face the gossip of her neighbors, long and difficult journeys, little medical help, and murderous attempts on her son, but with God-given faith, she trusted God's word.

Are we so trusting? To have that kind of trust, we need to go back to God's grace in Jesus. We go to God's grace expressed in his Word. We go to God's grace poured out in the waters of Holy Baptism. We go to God's grace laid out for us in the feast of his Holy Supper. So in these final hours of Advent, we go back to God's grace, and with faith-filled hearts, we await the coming of our King. We celebrate the first coming of Jesus and we long for his coming again. Dear friends, the King is coming soon, and for us he comes in glorious grace! Amen.