

“WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS: In Love”

A sermon preached by
Rev. Hammett N. Evans
Fordyce First United Methodist Church
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Luke 1:26-38^a ²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel^b Gabriel was sent from God into a Galilean city named Nazareth ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph from David’s house, and the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And having entered toward her, he said,^c “Rejoice, highly favored one! The Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was very confused by the saying^d and pondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel^e said to her, “Don’t fear, Mary, for you have found favor^f with God.^g ³¹ And – look! You will conceive in belly and give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called, ‘Son of the Highest,’ and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. ³³ And he will reign over Jacob’s house into the ages and there will be no end of his kingdom.” ³⁴ But Mary said to the angel,^h “How will this be, since I don’t know a man?” ³⁵ And the angelⁱ answered. He said to her, “Holy spirit will come upon you from on high, and power of the most high will overshadow you, and therefore the holy one being begotten will be called God’s son.

³⁶ And – look! Your female relative, Elizabeth, herself has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her, the one called sterile. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible for God.^j ³⁸ Then Mary said, “Look! I’m the Lord’s maidservant. Let it be for me according to your word.” Then the angel^k went away from her.

Luke 1:46-55^l ⁴⁶ Then Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices upon God my savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked upon the humble state of his maidservant. For listen! From now on all generations will call me, ‘Blessed,’ ⁴⁹ for the Powerful One has done great things for me, and his name is holy, ⁵⁰ and his mercy *is* upon generation to generation to those fearing him. ⁵¹ He has done mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are arrogant in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has pulled down the powerful from thrones and picked up the humble; ⁵³ he has filled up the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped Israel, his slave, to remember mercy, ⁵⁵ just as he said to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed to eternity.”

Frederick Buechner describes the angel Gabriel’s encounter with Mary this way: “She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl.”^m

God sent Gabriel to a little Galilean village called Nazareth. It wasn’t much of a town. It isn’t mentioned in the Old Testament, not even once. The angel came to deliver a message to a young woman named Mary. She was really just a girl, somewhere around Emily or Leslie or Carlee’s age. Back then, girls could marry at the age of ten.

Gabriel said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” Who was she to receive such a greeting? She was an outsider: poor, powerless, perplexed at the angel’s greeting. Mary was at a crossroads, caught between girlhood and womanhood, betrothed yet unmarried, no one to support her if the least little thing went wrong. How could God favor her?

Gabriel said, “Don’t fear, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” He announced a pregnancy, a birth, a name, and a future of a child and his kingdom. He said she would conceive and bear a son. She would name him, “Jesus,” which means, “the LORD saves, rescues, delivers.” God, who turned the universe from chaos to creation, God who delivered Noah, God, who heard the cry of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt, God who parted the Red Sea, God, who stood with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, God who delivered Daniel from the lions, THIS God who saves, delivers, and rescues would do something new in this child. He would be the king and his kingdom would have no end.

Mary saw one little problem. She said to the angel, “How can this be, since I don’t know a man?” Mary’s question was gynecological, but Gabriel’s answer was theological. He said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you from on high, and power of the most high will overshadow you, and therefore the holy one being begotten will be called, ‘God’s Son.’” Gabriel says that God is behind this birth. God is at work, rescuing God’s people in a new and surprising way.

That’s how God is. Just when old Abraham and Sarah start to think God has broken his promise, barren Sarah gets pregnant. Just when sinful king David starts to think his life is over, God sends him a son, Solomon. Just when a bunch of exiles start thinking God has abandoned them forever, God sends a Persian king to rescue and send them home. God loves a surprise ending, especially when it is also a new beginning!

Gabriel continues, “And – look! – your female relative, Elizabeth, herself has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her, the one called sterile. For nothing is impossible with God.” The Spirit that calmed the waters in creation and raised up dry bones in Babylon will come over Mary. God’s power that overshadowed Moses on Mount Sinai will overshadow her. Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson’s mother, and Hannah before her, Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, will have a baby in her old age. For *this* God, *nothing* is impossible.

Gabriel delivered God’s invitation. It was a dangerous mission. Giving birth was painful, no epidurals. The infant mortality rate was high, perhaps more than as 30%. Many women died in childbirth. On top of all that, the minimum punishment for a betrothed woman getting pregnant was to be shunned by her family, friends, and community. The maximum punishment was being stoned to death by her prospective husband.

Put yourselves in Mary’s shoes. What would you do? How would you respond to God’s invitation? Would you risk your reputation, your family, your life for God? What if the whole future of Creation hung on your answer?

Mary’s answer was courageous. Listen again. “Look, I’m the Lord’s maidservant. Let it be for me according to your word.” Here she is, Mary French’s age, offering herself in service to God. She knows will be ostracized. She knows her husband will consider divorce. She will know the pain of losing a son.

In church, we often speak of Christ’s sacrifice, but how often do we give credit where credit is due? Jesus learned the value of sacrificial love from his mother. He learned it when she kept her dignity when people whispered. He learned it when she maintained her poise when they pointed. He learned it when she did without so that he could have. He carried the lessons she taught when the good folks of Nazareth called him “Mary’s son.”^m They were saying he didn’t have a daddy.

The irony of it all was that Mary did it for them, for the gossips and the finger-pointers, for the name-callers and the excluders. She did it to save them. So did he. So did he. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

^a Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^b Or *messenger*.

^c Or *And having entered, he said to her*.

^d Literally, *But on the word, she was confused*.

^e Or *messenger*.

^f Or *grace*.

^g Literally, *in God’s presence*.

^h Or *messenger*.

ⁱ Or *messenger*.

^j Literally, *For not any word will be impossible from God*.

^k Or *messenger*.

^l Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^m Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*, p. 124.

ⁿ See Mark 6:3.