

**Third Sunday in Advent**  
**December 15, 2013**  
*The Place of Lasting Joy*  
**Luke 1:26-38**

**Introduction**

The Christmas season is a time of joy! Perhaps the most recognized of all Christmas carols is Isaac Watts' *Joy to the World, the Lord is Come*. Most of us have fond memories of Christmas that warmly glow in our hearts this time of year. Perhaps the best memories for me, which admittedly are kind of foggy, are those early years of my childhood when Santa was a mystery, sleep on Christmas Eve was tough to find, and the lights on the tree seemed to glow magically. I don't remember the gifts that I received, but I do recall feeling loved and secure. Too bad we have to grow up.

But my adulthood has had wonderful moments as well. I remember one Christmas Eve in the high desert of Southern California when the temperatures dipped below zero. The water pipes into our baptistery burst, sending hundreds of gallons of water on the sanctuary floor. A real catastrophe because we were planning on having two Christmas Eve services that night which were always well attended in our large church. We quickly assembled a crew of about fifty men and proceeded to tear out the carpet and padding on the sanctuary floor. Then came the squeegees and the mops. I remember it well because of the camaraderie. We had our two services later that night on concrete floors. Nobody seemed to mind. Over the years, I've done countless children's musicals, extravaganzas, Living Christmas Trees and beautiful Christmas Eve services. A few crises, a lot of work, but a lot of joy!

I found a different sort of joy in the time spent with my children and now grandchildren on Christmas Day. The warmth of family love and fellowship brings a deep sense of gratitude and satisfaction. Christmas is, without doubt, the most sentimental time of the year.

The problem is, the feelings don't last. Christmas Day is over. My football team has lost again. The family leaves. The tree needs to come down and the decorations have to be put away. Gotta go back to work and the heating bill is due. (Which, by the way, ought to be a doozy this cycle!) The Christmas joy that we experience through this month is wonderful, but it doesn't last much past New Years.

Biblical joy is a "horse of a different color." While it certainly manifests itself emotionally, its roots lie much deeper than a season of the year or positive circumstances. Mary's story, in Luke's Gospel, shows where we find the place of lasting joy.

**The Word – Luke 1:26-38 (ESV)**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

## **Prayer**

### **A Profile of Mary**

We read, at the beginning of our text, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth..." The sixth month refers to Elizabeth's pregnancy and Gabriel was the same angelic messenger that announced her child, John the Baptist's conception. All of the details in this story are loaded, but I want to highlight one that is frequently overlooked. Nazareth of Galilee was not an address to be coveted in the first century. Those who lived in Judah scorned their brethren who lived in the north. They considered them "unclean" because of their close contact with the Gentile world and the half-breed children of Israel, the Samaritans. Moreover, Nazareth had a poor reputation among the culture as Nathaniel, a disciple of Jesus in later years, asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:47)

Now Mary was a resident of that ill-regarded town. She was fully Jewish, to be sure. Indeed, she was of the royal house of David. But her station in life was with the poor and humble. A strange lineage for the Mother of God.

We know the story well. Mary was a virgin; she had known no man. Most likely, she was in her middle to late teen years – the age of a high school student today. And she was engaged to be married to Joseph a carpenter who also lived in Nazareth. Most of us know that engagement at that time was nearly equal in covenantal commitment to marriage. The only things lacking were

the ceremony, consummation, and the making of a household together. Such a commitment would not be easily broken.

### **Greetings and Announcement**

So when an angel named Gabriel met Mary of Nazareth her angst and confusion would not be at all surprising. His words to Mary were loaded with meaning, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” “Favored one” literally means “one who is endued with grace.” Grace, of course, is God’s favor given to us freely without our merit. And Mary was overflowing with this divine grace. Furthermore, Gabriel told her that the Lord was with her. In the Scriptures, the phrase “the Lord is with you” normally was an encouragement to someone as they were about to face a certain challenge.

Put yourself in Mary’s shoes. You are a simple girl. You have no privilege in life. You have no wealth - no status. Your community is scorned among your countrymen. Even your gender puts you at a disadvantage. To be sure, you are devout and try to follow God. But why would this messenger from God come to you and say that you – of all people – were full of favor and that Yahweh himself was with you? You – just a simple girl engaged to be married to a simple man! Nothing like this had ever happened before. It would be like winning the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes without even entering. Can you grasp the drama of this whole scene? Luke’s description, “[Mary] was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be” seems to be somewhat of an understatement. If I were Mary, I’d have Gabriel check his GPS and see if he got the address right.

Fortunately, Mary was not like me and she listened to the angel’s announcement, “Do not be afraid, Mary, (I love that...) for you have found favor with God.” He reassures her that this is indeed good news before he drops the bombshell, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

No words like that had ever been said to any woman before or since. It is inconceivable how anyone could take it all in with just one hearing. Perhaps Mary’s youth spared her from all the adult calculations that might have occurred to an older woman. But I’m certain Mary’s mind must have raced. Perhaps she first considered that this child would be one she would conceive after her marriage with Joseph. But there must have been something in the angel’s delivery and message to hint that the normal rules of nature would be set aside,

“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Gabriel got right to the point, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...” It is a good thing that he gave a greeting of God’s grace when he came in. This information would be terrifying otherwise. “...therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.” I suspect the pieces were beginning to fall in place for Mary. All Jews at that time were eagerly looking for the Messiah. Perhaps Mary understood that this Jesus – her little boy – would be the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God.

Gabriel had already demonstrated his sensitivity to Mary when he told her “fear not.” This time, Gabriel addressed any doubts that Mary might have had, “And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

### **Mary’s Response**

What would you do with such news if you were Mary? There has never been an announcement like this in all of history. Mary stands unique among the human race as the one who bore in her body the child who was fully man and fully God. It was a privilege that would have been beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, let alone a poor teenage girl from the lowly city of Nazareth. It is true in some segments of Christendom that Mary is perhaps honored beyond her due – nearly to the point of deification. But let us not be so blind as to recognize the uniqueness of this humble woman. She is, as the Scripture says, the most blessed of all women.

But underneath the euphoria of being the mother of the Messiah lay a great personal cost. She would be with child before she had been with her husband. No one would believe her story. How would she tell Joseph? She would be scorned as an adulteress throughout her life should she escape the stoning required by law. Surely, Mary considered the cost.

But just as her Son would ultimately demonstrate on the cross, she would bow in humility and lay down her life for God’s purpose: (Read it with me.) “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

### **Lessons from Mary**

Mary’s story is inspiring and instructive to us. Her response to God’s call is a foreshadowing of the Kingdom of God. She was poor woman of no cultural distinction. Her hometown was despised among her people. But Mary models what her Son, Jesus, would later preach:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are the gentle and lowly, for they shall inherit the earth.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

(Matt. 5:3,5 & 8)

Mary shows us what it is to be the humble servant, the very kind of person who is the least in the world's assessment but the greatest in God's view.

But if Mary was a person of meager means she was a woman of bountiful faith and courage. The Scriptures say that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Though the promise was incredulous and Mary could not see or feel the child, she believed God. And all of her godly virtues converged in an act of faith steeled by courage. I love the definition that C.S. Lewis offers: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues; but the form of every virtue at the testing point." That testing point for Mary was her encounter with the angel. In the face of natural impossibility and unbearable – perhaps even fatal - social disgrace, she said "yes" to God. So what's our excuse?

I'm currently reading a book called *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Richard Stearns. Stearns is now the CEO of World Vision, living in a typical American home in Seattle, Washington and traveling the world where he interacts with some of the most poor and destitute of the human race. He never set out to work for World Vision. Never wanted the job; in fact, for months he strongly resisted their attempts to recruit him. You see, he was the CEO of Lenox, the fine china company, and was living the lavish life of a wealthy man with all the trappings. But there was a time earlier in his life when Stearns told God that he would do whatever God wanted. The Lord called in 1998. Try as he might, he couldn't escape God's call to lead World Vision. When he finally said "yes" to God, he had to say "no" to an offer of a \$50 million dollar stake in a business venture he was offered.<sup>1</sup> Quite a cost.

So let me ask again: what's our excuse? What is it that God is asking you to do? Mentor a child? Help build something? Invest your life with those who are hurting here in our city? Give financially to support a ministry that tugs at your heart? What's holding you back? Fear? You don't have time? You don't have the money? What is it that God is asking of you?

Mary shows us the way.

### **Postscript – The Place of Lasting Joy**

But that's not the end of the story. After Gabriel's visit, Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea to visit her relative Elizabeth. When she arrived, Elizabeth's baby jumped in her womb at the sound of Mary's voice. She was filled with the Spirit and cried out to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Mary nearly exploded with joy:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, p. 46.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Mary had surrendered to God’s plan. She counted the cost and said “yes.” She put herself in the  
center of God’s will. And that’s where we will find true lasting joy.

How many of us, with Mary, will say, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me  
according to your word?”