

“God Has a Surprise for You”

December 23, 2018

4th Advent

Today is a different kind of Sunday. Last week was such an exciting day of worship with the Advent Music service, the Children’s Lovefeast, and then the Congregational Lovefeast. And tomorrow is Christmas Eve and we all know how exciting that is; in fact, I think that most Moravians would say that Christmas Eve is even better than Christmas Day itself. So that leaves today with that “caught in the middle” kind of feeling, as we remember and reflect about last week and anticipate tomorrow. And that actually makes it a great Advent Sunday because Advent is a time for remembering and reflecting on the past and anticipating the future.

I would imagine that Mary spent a good bit of time doing both of those things after the angel Gabriel’s announcement to her. Well, at least she probably did after getting over the shocking news that Gabriel shared with her. It likely took awhile for her to absorb the idea that she would conceive and bear the Son of God. This morning I want us to consider Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement and how she serves as a model for us when God chooses us to do what seems impossible.

The Annunciation, the account of Gabriel announcing to Mary what God is going to do through her, is one of the key events in the story of Jesus’ incarnation. It has three distinct parts. First there is the announcement itself, then there is Mary’s reaction, and finally there is Mary’s response.

The story begins with the author of Luke setting the stage and letting us know who all is involved- God, the Angel Gabriel, Joseph and Mary. He tells us that it happens in Nazareth and he even indicates the time as the “sixth month” which is a reference to the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth who, with her husband Zechariah, was blessed by God by having a child in their old age. The “sixth month” was the amount of time that had passed since Elizabeth found out she was pregnant. She

eventually gives birth to John, who becomes known as John the Baptist and serves as the forerunner of Jesus. Already John is preparing the way for Jesus, this time for his miraculous birth.

Jesus' birth to a virgin is more miraculous than John's birth to a woman in her old age; just as, later on, Jesus' ministry was more important than the ministry of John. John himself acknowledges this when he says: *"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* Throughout his life, John fills his role as the forerunner of Jesus, even up to his unjust death when he was offered as a sacrifice to Herod's daughter. But all of that happens much later.

The scene is set- God sends his angel to Nazareth to visit Mary, a virgin who is engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Not only does God send Gabriel to visit Mary but God sends him with some news to share with her. He greets her with these words: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

Think about that for a minute. Here we have poor, young Mary being visited by angel. We have to assume that she realized who her visitor was, that he was not just some guy who showed up at her door, but that he was a messenger from God. Where Mary seems to accept this right away, it would probably take a lot of convincing if the same thing were to happen today. Perhaps angel visits were more common in those days, or perhaps Gabriel's angelic identity was just unmistakable.

"Greetings, favored one!" he begins. I am sure that Mary was amazed to be called "favored one" and not just because it was coming from a messenger of God. We all liked to be noticed, to be favored, to have the approval of others. It feels great to know that we are recognized, that we have significance, that we matter. Even in the smallest ways, like checking the mail and seeing that you received a Christmas card

from a friend that you haven't heard from or seen in years. It is just good to know that someone is thinking of you, they have noticed you.

That feeling must have been multiplied for Mary, hearing the angel of the Lord call her "favored one". For it means that she has found favor with God, that the Creator of heaven and earth and all of life has noticed her. Yet as good as that made her feel, it also must have been confusing. *"But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."* Perplexed and pondering is probably an understatement for the way she was feeling.

A different translation puts it like this- *"She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that."* Thoroughly shaken and wondering what was behind it is a much better representation of Mary's reaction. And before she even has time to figure out what in the world was going on, Gabriel continues and his words shake her up even more. For not only does she find out that she is favored by God, but now she learns what that means for her.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David." Hearing this, I am sure that Mary was even more shaken, and wondering how this was a blessing for her. How can an unplanned pregnancy for an unwed mother be considered anything remotely approaching a blessing? And not only that but she would be bearing the Son of God. No pressure there at all.

Mary's initial reaction goes right to the most practical consideration and she asks how it can even be possible since she is a virgin. Gabriel tells her that it will happen through the power of the Holy Spirit and reminds her about her relative Elizabeth conceiving a child in her old age "for nothing will be impossible with God." This satisfies

Mary and she responds with her acceptance of what will happen, acknowledging that she is the Lord's servant. It is a remarkable response to unexpected news.

So here is the Annunciation- Gabriel telling Mary what is going to happen, Mary's initial response of perplexity, and then her seemingly quick acceptance of God's plan for her. Mary's response deserves a bit of a closer look, for it is truly remarkable, maybe even unprecedented.

Within in a span of a few minutes, Mary's life is turned totally upside down. One minute she is joyfully anticipating her upcoming marriage to Joseph, the next she finds out that she is going to bring the Son of God into the world. God has noticed her, God has favored her, God wants to accomplish wonderful things through her. Mary is being called to a prophetic task of bearing and raising the Savior of the world.

That is a lot to take in, it is a lot to comprehend, it is a lot to understand. And it is not all good. The very idea surely raises some unpleasant possibilities about things like how Joseph will respond to this news, how her family will respond, and the potential scandal it will cause for her to suddenly be pregnant before marrying Joseph.

Yet Mary doesn't seem to be fazed by any of it. She asks the one question about how it is even possible and then accepts Gabriel's answer that it will be possible through the power of the Holy Spirit and says, in effect, "If that's the case, then bring it on." I often wonder how she could so easily and quickly accept everything that Gabriel was telling her. She didn't ask for time to think it over, to pray on it, to make sure it was the right thing to do. She just did it. She showed her true and complete faith in God and in herself as God's chosen and favored one.

Taking it at face value, as it is written, the whole exchange would take no more than five minutes- from the time Gabriel greets Mary and tells her what is going to happen to Mary's faithful acceptance of God's plan for her. But I have to question if it was really that fast. If so, then Mary is fully deserving of all of the praise and adoration that she receives. But I can also see how it didn't happen that fast, it couldn't happen that fast. Which wouldn't mean that Mary isn't deserving of praise and adoration, it would simply mean that she was human, like her son, and like all of us.

It's hard to imagine that it happened exactly as it is written. At least it is hard for me to imagine. I know that I would have to give something like that a lot of thought, a lot of prayer, a lot of contemplation. I would want to weigh the pros and cons, write lists, and seek advice from others. I would try to make as fully informed a decision as I possibly could. I don't think that I have ever in my life made a decision so momentous as quickly as Mary made her life changing decision to accept God's plan for her.

Well, except for once. It was just a little over 13 years ago this very week. After not having any success in having a child, Kelly and I decided to explore adoption. But it was really just an idea and far from being something that seemed like an actual possibility, it wasn't something that we were expecting to happen.. Until one day when we got a call from an agency that we had contacted months before telling us that they may have a child for us. The timing couldn't have been worse. It was only a week before Christmas, and we were just getting ready to close on the first home we had ever bought. You know how they say that some of the most stressful times of life are Christmas, moving, and having children? Well, we were looking at the first two already and couldn't really comprehend adding a third.

Yet we just couldn't not return that phone call and at least find out more. We did and we learned that it was a homeless drug addict who was looking for a couple to adopt her as yet unborn baby. That set off all kinds of red flags about things like the

baby's health, how we could help the mother until the baby was born, and how we could afford a new child and a new home in such a short period of time. But something kept us moving forward with it all.

We arranged for the birth mother to have a prenatal doctor's visit and, at least in our minds, felt that would be the make or break for our decision. The appointment was scheduled for December 20 which just happened to be the day after we closed on our new house. That evening, being anxious to hear the results of the visit, I went to pick up the birth mother and help find her a place to stay for the night. The report from the doctor was positive- by all indications the baby was healthy and probably wouldn't be born for at least six weeks.

After getting her a hotel room for the night, Kelly and I had a long and painful discussion. We wanted to adopt this woman's baby, but we weren't sure what to do. How could we care for her for the next six weeks? Should we invite her to stay with us? Was there somewhere else she could stay until the baby was born? We went to sleep that night with many questions and no answers.

And then, about 2:00 in the morning the phone rang. Startled out of sleep, Kelly was the first to answer. We both heard the voice on the other end saying words that would forever change our lives, "Get to the hospital, your son has been born." At this point, I guess we could have paused and thought, and prayed, and contemplated. We could have weighed the pros and cons, written lists, and sought advice from others so that we could make as fully informed a decision as we possibly could. But we didn't do that. Instead we went to the hospital and met the son that God had given to us.

Thinking about it like that, maybe I should try to be more like Mary in other aspects of my life. Maybe I should be more trusting of God and have a more complete faith like Mary exhibited when Gabriel told her what God was going to do. Mary didn't

hesitate, she just said yes. In doing so she shows us what true and complete faith looks like and sounds like. I would do well to have even a fraction of her faith. We would all do well to have even a fraction of that faith.

For we are more like Mary than we think. We, too, are God's favored ones. God notices us, God favors us, and God wants to accomplish great things through us. God calls us to the same prophetic task that God called Mary- to bear and raise the Savior of the world. While we are not called to physically bear Jesus in the way that Mary bore him, we are called to bring him to the world by sharing with the world the faith that we have in his grace, the hope that we have in our salvation through him, and the love that we receive from God who loves us so much that he became one of us. In doing so, we bring Jesus into the world.

And we are called to raise him by lifting up our faith, by elevating our hope, by allowing all to see our love, by letting his light shine in the darkness because the darkness cannot overcome it. This is what God is calling us to do, this is who God is calling us to be.

I want to close with the Annunciation again, this time in a little bit different words. Gabriel was sent to Mary and greeted her, telling her that she had found favor with God:

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus... And Mary said, Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.

We have nothing to fear. We have found favor with God and God has chosen us to accomplish great things. God has a surprise for you. It is amazing how surprising God can be when we let him. It is amazing how he can cause us to expect the

unexpected and make the impossible possible. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, as we remember the past and anticipate the future, may we all learn from Mary and be ready to say to God *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*