

This morning we half-way through the Advent season’ are two weeks from celebrating Christmas on a Sunday morning. Hopefully by now most of us know that Advent means “arrival” or “coming” and in the context of the church, Advent is the season when we look towards the arrival, the coming of Jesus, the long promised Savior into the world. In that sense, we celebrate Advent so that we who claim Christ can be properly prepared when Christmas day arrives. We saw this reflected in our text from last week’s sermon where we saw how God prepared His people for the arrival, the coming of the long-awaited Messiah before Jesus was born. We have been celebrating the Advent season by looking at how the gospel is reflected in the birth of Jesus Christ throughout the first two chapters of the gospel of Luke. In the first chapter, there are four narratives, four stories in chapter 1 which cover the fifteen-month period just before the birth of our Lord Jesus. All four of these narratives, these stories, reveal how God prepared four Jews of the nation of Israel for the arrival, the coming of the Savior *by choosing to use them as instruments of His grace* to reveal to His eternal plan of forgiveness and redemption and restoration to the world. We looked at the first narrative, the first story, last week in Luke 1:1-25 where we read of an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who could not have children. But as Zechariah was serving his turn in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to Zechariah the staggering news that he and Elizabeth would have a son named John, who would be an instrument of God’s grace in preparing the way for the ministry of the Messiah who would soon arrive. And we saw that in spite of Zechariah’s unbelief Elizabeth did conceive “*and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people”* (Luke 1:24—25).

This morning we look at the second narrative, which introduces another appearance by the angel Gabriel. This time Gabriel’s pronouncement is even more amazing than what he proclaimed to Zechariah. What we will see that while Zechariah and Mary both *initially* responded to Gabriel’s *appearances* with fear and apprehension - their responses to Gabriel’s *pronouncement* were polar opposites. In our text from last week we read that as God prepared Zechariah to be an instrument of His grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world, Zechariah responded with *unbelief* – but in our text for this morning we will see that as God prepared Mary to be an instrument of His grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world, she responded with *praise*. Our text for today tells us how we should respond when God calls us to be used by Him.

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. Luke 1:26-29

In our text for today we pick up where we left off last week. Elizabeth is now in her sixth month of pregnancy. We shift our focus from Jerusalem in the province of Judea, to Nazareth in the province of Galilee. We are introduced to “*Joseph.*” Matthew, in his gospel, tells us that Joseph was a direct descendant of King David through Solomon. He also tells us that Joseph was a carpenter and that he was a “*righteous man.*” We are also introduced to “*Mary.*” According to Luke’s gospel Mary to be a direct descendant of King David through his son Nathan. We are also told Mary was “*betrothed*” to Joseph which was more than just being engaged. Betrothal was a solemn, priest-consecrated, pre-marriage relationship, so binding that divorce was necessary to break it. We also read that Mary was a “*virgin*”, a girl who was committed to remain morally pure. It’s into this context the angel Gabriel appears and makes a divine pronouncement. Now from a human perspective this is a strange place for this to happen again. The first-time Gabriel appeared before a priest in the most sacred place in the great temple in Jerusalem. This time Gabriel appears before a young woman in a home in the town of Nazareth, which was widely known for its idolatry, immorality and corruption.

It's here Gabriel appears before Mary and proclaims: "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*" The word "*Greetings*" here is a greeting, but it is also an equivalent of the word "favor," or literally, "grace." So Gabriel's greeting is really, "Favor, O favored one" or "Grace, O graced one." What this means is that this greeting is God's revelation of the maturity of Mary's character, which fits the responsibility to which God is going to call her. What Gabriel is literally saying to Mary is: "Grace unto you. You are endowed with the character of grace. The Lord is with you." God, through Gabriel, is revealing that Mary is a young woman who has accepted God's grace and lives out God's grace in quietness, peace and purity. Unaffected by the Nazarene environment of idolatry, immorality and corruption she is now going to be protected and sustained by God's grace.

We read that Mary is "*greatly troubled*" by Gabriel's greeting. Hers was a different response than Zechariah, who "*feared*" the angel when he was visited by him in the temple in that Mary was "*greatly troubled*" by the *message*, not the *messenger*. The problem for Mary is that she is *troubled* – maybe a better word would be *confused* - about what Gabriel said about Mary's character. She did not see herself as a "*favored one*." She did not understand that her life *reflected* the quietness, peace and purity of God's grace. Mary was not preoccupied with who she was or how people saw her. She was not full of herself because she was full of God. It *troubled* her that she was being complemented "*and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be*." And as she thought this through, we read:

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. Luke 1:30-31

Gabriel first greeted Mary, by saying, "*Grace*," to her. Now the angel uses that same word again: "*You have found 'favor' with God*." And this time, as with Zechariah, he also says, "*Do not be afraid*" - but this time, those words have a differing meaning. The preposition "*with*" in "*You have found favor 'with' God*" changes the focus of the word "*favor/grace*" from the description of *Mary's character* to the description of *how God's grace is going to work* in and through Mary to impact all of human history. It means not merely that God is bestowing grace on Mary, but that she is given grace, literally, "by the side of God, in the fellowship of God." And so, because of what will happen to her and what would happen to her son, the angel said to her: "*Do not be afraid*." Gabriel then declares the purpose for which God chose to bless Mary with the favor of His grace. She will conceive and she will give birth to a boy who is to be named "*Jesus*" which is the Greek word for Joshua, means "Jehovah-Salvation." In the gospel of Matthew we read that Gabriel appeared to Joseph, and said to him, "*you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus would be the fulfillment of God's long awaited promise to send a Savior into the world to "*save his people from their sins*." Mary's baby boy would be "Jehovah Salvation" - the one who offers deliverance from the bondage of sin and who would satisfy the universal need for a Savior. The apostle Paul would write of this some 65 years later in 1Timothy 1:15: "*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners.*"

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." Luke 1:32-33

Gabriel goes on to proclaim that Jesus is much more than just the Savior of the world. Jesus is also God Himself ("*the Son of the Most High*") and the King of Kings ("*the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever*") and the Lord of the Universe ("*of his kingdom there will be no end*"). The prophet Isaiah proclaimed: "*His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore*" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

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." Luke 1:34-37

Mary responds to the angel Gabriel's pronouncement with a question. Her question, while it seemed to be somewhat the same, is clearly different than the unbelieving question of Zechariah the priest. We know that because of the reaction that the angel Gabriel had to both questions. In Zechariah's case, Gabriel rebuked Zechariah and made him a mute until his son was born. In Mary's case, she is wondrously blessed by God. In knowing that Mary was not preoccupied with herself and that her life reflected the character of quietness, peace and purity of God's grace – Mary's question was a questioning of pragmatic, transparent simplicity. She had never been with a man, and since these were the days before in vitro fertilization, she could not be pregnant: *"How will this be?"*

The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive by the power of God through the Holy Spirit: *"therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."* The promised Savior would be born by supernatural conception as a human being, so that he would fulfill the requirement that the Savior be a holy, spotless, sinless, blameless, perfect sacrifice for our sins. Galatians 4:4-5 tells us, *"when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."* C.S. Lewis spoke of this when he wrote: "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God." The joy and the miracle of the meaning of Christmas is. *"that we might receive adoption as sons."* Amen? The angel also tells Mary that same power of God has already been evidenced in the life of her aged cousin Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant. God is not restricted by the natural order of things as we know them. He is totally free to do anything and everything that extraordinary beyond our understanding or imagination. Gabriel is telling Mary about Elizabeth's miracle to be convince her and strengthen her in her own struggle to understand all that is happening to her: *"For nothing will be impossible with God"* - which literally means: "For no word from God shall be void of power."

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. Luke 1:38

Here again we see the quiet, peaceful and purity of God's grace reflected in Mary's character as she responds to the pronouncement of God's purpose in her life with humble submission (*"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord"*) and with single-minded obedience (*"let it be to me according to your word"*). In hearing the call of God on her life Mary humbly surrendered her rights and gave herself fully to God, and she radically committed herself to an unwavering, single-minded obedience to God – so that she might be an instrument of God's grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world. Here we see the immediate submission and obedience of Mary to the will of God contrasted with the hesitant, unbelieving request of Zachariah, a man who was a priest for many years. Just as Mary's response surpasses that of Zachariah, so the greatness of Jesus Christ and His ministry on earth surpass the greatness of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah, and his ministry.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Luke 1:39-45

Mary immediately responds to Gabriel's pronouncement by traveling the four-day journey south to Judah to be with her cousin Elizabeth. She most likely was looking for support and encouragement, and she also probably did so to confirm Gabriel's word about Elizabeth. Mary's arrival in Zechariah and Elizabeth's home seems to have been unexpected. The verses tell us that as Mary goes inside to find her cousin, she sees her face to face and greets her, and at the sound of Mary's voice two wondrous things happen to Elizabeth. First, Elizabeth's six-month-old unborn "*baby leaped for joy . . . in her womb* - and second, Elizabeth was "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" who then gave her a revelation from God of the unseen spiritual realities involved in her encounter with Mary. And Elizabeth immediately joyfully praises God.

“And she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.’” Luke 1:42-45

The Holy Spirit gave Elizabeth a revelation of the long-awaited promise of God and the purpose of God in preparing a people of God to be instruments of His grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world – and she saw her part in that, she was joyfully moved to worship God. And our text for today tells us that when she did so, Mary was joyfully moved to do the same.

*And Mary said, “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.”* Luke 1:46-55

These verses are a hymn which come from heart and mouth of Mary, the mother of Jesus. By tradition this hymn is called *The Magnificat* or Mary's Song of Praise. When Elizabeth began to praise God, we read, "*she exclaimed with a loud cry*" - but Mary begins her praise more quietly. Mary's is a hymn of praise that grows gradually in volume and intensity; the buildup grows out of her expressions of her experience. She had traveled four days, probably alone, to reach the home of her cousin. She has had four days to meditate, four days to ponder on Scripture; four days to pray, four days of communion with her Lord; four days to sing. Her hymn of praise has four stanzas.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” In the opening stanza, Mary sings of *God's grace currently at work* in her life and her own experience of joy and worship because of her personal relationship with God. Mary sings this hymn because God is favoring her character of humility and gracing her lifestyle of purity. She sings because of the joy she is experiencing in the divine pronouncement of Gabriel and forthcoming miraculous conception of the Messiah. Mary sings because her humble submission and single-minded obedience is enabling her to be an instrument of God's grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world.

“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.” In this stanza Mary's voice begins to grow louder as she sings praises for the wondrous work of *God's grace that she will experience* in her life.

Mary sings first of how the grace of God has raised Mary's above her low place in life in order to do a great thing for her: He will make her the mother of God: *"For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed."* This is probably the place for a warning against an undue exaltation of Mary as morally unique. John Piper writes: "Mary is unique among all women. No one else bore the Son of God. But the Roman Catholic doctrines of her sinless life, her perpetual virginity, her bodily assumption into heaven have no warrant in the New Testament." In fact, there is an implicit warning against excessive reverence of Mary in Luke 11:27–28. Luke tells us that once after Jesus had spoken *"a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!'* But he said, *'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'* At another time, in Luke 8:19–21, we read: *"His mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.'* But he answered them, *'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'*" Jesus was blunt in both of these instances, and there no indication that because Mary was called *"blessed"* that she should be revered in a moral class by herself. Mary's song of praise tells us that she will be called *"blessed"* because God has done great things for her, because God is holy and because God's mercy is for those who fear him. What this means is that blessedness in life does not mean absence of pain or struggles or difficulties, but rather blessedness comes as a result of the spiritual satisfaction with life that only God can give. Mary's own experience with God, and its resultant blessing, enabled her to see that God is the one to be honored - for it is his mighty deeds, His creative power, His holiness, His perfection. Blessedness is God's mercy toward her and all who fear and respect who he is. That is the blessedness in life. In Psalm 112:1-2 the psalmist writes: *"Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments! His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed."*

"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." In this third stanza Mary develops the historical consequences of God's nature in his holiness, his might, his mercy - describing his mighty acts of grace - past, present, and future. These verses tell us that God accomplishes through the gospel a complete reversal of human values. It is not the spiritually proud, the socially mighty, nor the materially prosperous who will have the last word. The Messiah will scatter, put down and send away the prosperous and the powerful because arrogance, power and wealth do not matter in the kingdom of God. This merciful God will exalt and bless those who fear him, those who are humble, and those who are spiritually broken. God will fill the spiritually hungry *"with good things"*!

"He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." The fourth stanza of Mary's song of praise is a thoughtful benediction of blessing as she sings of God's grace to Israel, specifically, in the promise made to Abraham through the coming Messiah. This blessing promises that the true children of Israel will be transformed into a glorified Messianic nation, a holy nation of joint heirs with us in Jesus Christ.

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. Luke 1:56

We have no record of the final six months of Mary's pregnancy; Luke does not mention her again until Luke 2 when we read of the birth of Jesus. Most likely she sang praises to God. In our text last week, we saw that God is sovereign and God is gracious and God's promises will come to pass despite our fearful unbelief. In today's text we have seen that God is sovereign and God is gracious and God's promises will come to pass when we humbly submit and radically obey God's call to be instruments of His grace for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world. - and when we do, God will bless us and we will worship Him with praises that give great glory to His name!