

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

Date: 24 December 2023, Advent 4

Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Am I supposed to feel a little bit of pity for this solitary day that is Advent 4? I'm not even certain whether it has a full 24 hours! I imagine that some of us are awaiting the timely end to this worship service so that we can begin to collectively make the final arrangements for today's Christmas Eve services. If that is you, I completely understand and I pass no judgment. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel with such a short Advent 4. However, regardless of our feelings, I think the Sundays of Advent always carry insights for us, if we

will have them. I believe this Advent 4, as short as it is, still has something to share, so we should hear it out.

The main thing this morning offers us is the gospel story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. This story makes the most sense when we recall that earlier in the same chapter of Luke 1, the angel Gabriel first visited Zechariah the priest. Zechariah was the husband of Mary's relative Elizabeth, and we are told they were both getting up there in years and they did not have any children. As a priest, there was always a possibility that Zechariah would be selected to enter the holiest part of the temple to offer incense. When this occasion of performing this priestly duty, Gabriel was shocked to encounter Zechariah in this holiest of spaces. Gabriel was there to inform him that Elizabeth would have a baby and that Zechariah will name the child John. Zechariah responded to Gabriel with the question, "How can this be so?" I get it. They likely had determined years ago that they were not going to have any children, and they likely weren't holding on to any lingering hope. He had difficulty trusting that events would unfold as Gabriel had described them. Later in the chapter, when Gabriel later told Mary that she would miraculously bear a child, she asked the same question that Zechariah asked; "How can this be so?" The interesting thing is that Zechariah is struck mute because of his question, while Mary received no punishment at all. That's because Zechariah should have known better. Jewish lore contains stories of elderly folks getting pregnant, most notable among them is the story of his ancestors Abraham and Sarah. I can't blame Zechariah for asking his question, but Gabriel did, so Zechariah was struck mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

On the other hand, the pregnancy that Gabriel describes to Mary is something completely new, so she is not faulted for questioning how it could be so. Ultimately, she responds affirmatively to the message. Shortly we will get to why she responded that way. Mary's quoted response to Gabriel's message – "let it be with me according to your word" – sounds very similar to what Jesus says later in Luke's gospel. "Father, if you are willing,

remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” These are both statements of trust before stepping into the unknown.

You and I also have moments like that in our lives, though it is likely the outcomes aren't quite as biblical. There will be times in our lives that we are at the precipice of an unknown future, and we are asked to trust that God goes with us. Looking back, I can recall various occasions in my life when this played out, and perhaps you can as well. When Ginger and I became engaged, we were in our first year of seminary studies at two different schools. I was in Columbus, OH and she was in Columbia, SC. We knew we didn't want to start our marriage with one of us forcing the other to transfer, so we did a comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of both schools... and everything was equal. Marriage itself is stepping into an unknown future together, and we knew that no matter which school we attended, God was going with us either way. So we gave a prayer of thanks for God's faithfulness and then we flipped a coin to settle it. That's how we both ended up in South Carolina. Like I said, the stories that you and I have might not be biblical in their scope, but there will be times in life when we will face an unknown future. A takeaway from Mary's story is that we should trust that God is with us.

When Gabriel and Mary were having their conversation, the angel was going about all the amazing things her son would do. The angel spoke of the spiritual magnitude of what would transpire. Yet, Mary it appears that Mary still wasn't convinced. So Gabriel changed his approach. Instead of reiterating the grand spiritual things taking place, Gabriel instead simply said that Mary's relative Elizabeth is pregnant. It was as if Gabriel said, “Okay, you're not convinced by the cosmic theological stuff I just told you. How about this: your relative Elizabeth is pregnant. Will that convince you that what I'm telling you is real?” That seemingly does the trick, because at that point Mary says her famous words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

We can learn from that. I could stand here and spout off a bunch of hefty theological ideas, but is that the best way for us to develop our trust in God? It might get us somewhere, but what I believe – and what seemed to work better for Mary – is that trust grows better through our lived experiences. Those unknown futures that we faced in the past; when we recount them, do we recognize how God was present with us? It is also the community that surrounds us that also helps us to trust. By supporting one another and encouraging one another during difficult times and when facing unknown futures. To see God working in the lives of the people around us. Mary was presented with an unknown future, yet she trusted that God would be with her because God was present with Elizabeth. It is not the grand treatises of the metaphysical realities that take place at this altar or in that font that inspire me to trust God. What inspires me to trust God is the open invitation to share in a meal. It is being washed and wrapped in the promises of God's love and acceptance that remind me of that fuzzy, ginormous towel that I was wrapped in after my childhood bathtimes. That helps me to trust that God will be with me. Like Mary, you and I will face unknown futures, and God will be with us through them all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.