

Introduction to the Scripture:

This story is called the “Annunciation” because Gabriel “announces” something. His first words to Mary are, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” This is the basis of the Rosary Prayer: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” The Annunciation is very important to Roman Catholics, and in their tradition is celebrated on March 25th actually. Why? It’s 9 months before Jesus is born.

And while Protestants don’t elevate Mary in the same way, still this passage is a centerpiece of our Christmas celebration. It’s where it all begins. So, listen for the Good News in this passage.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The 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. And 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then 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.

Sermon: Presence and Promise

She was young and, no doubt...well...ordinary. Just a young girl with her life ahead of her. Perhaps she daydreamed about the carpenter she planned to marry...the wedding, their home, their life together, and at some point, children. She surely had a lot to look forward to.

I wonder if she heard him coming, or if he simply appeared. He, of course, being Gabriel the angel, bringing her a life-changing, world-changing message from God.

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:28, 30-31)

And her response is typically read with a calm respectful tone, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” But I wonder if it was more like, “You have got to be kidding me!!! There is NO WAY!”

I don’t know if we can wrap our minds around the fear that must have churned inside her. Fear of what people would think, fear of what would happen to her body, fear of Joseph’s response, even rejection, fear of death (which was the consequence for adultery).

This was NOT good news for her. We’re told she was perplexed - a better translation is *troubled*. Yeah! No kidding! Who ever heard of a pregnant virgin? Indeed, how could that be?

Truly, Mary found herself in an unbelievable situation. I mean, if ever something were impossible, this was it! I’m sure she meant no disrespect to her heavenly visitor, but I’m also sure she had to double-check - just to make sure he was aware that, biologically, there was no way such an event could occur.

But still, there she was, being thrown into an embarrassing (and life-threatening) situation, by none other than God Himself. God isn’t supposed to put us in a bind. He’s supposed to get us out of them!

But listen again, to the first words out of Gabriel’s mouth when he greeted her:

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.

And some Bibles add, *Blessed are you among women!*

As God’s messenger – and that’s what angels in the Bible are...messengers from God - he spoke God’s message. And God’s message to Mary was one of favor, and blessing: Mary, you are amazing! And then she was given a special and unique purpose; chosen to do something that would change the world, something that no one else on earth will ever again have the privilege of doing; chosen to become honored above all other women. Amazing!

And with all this comes something else - something essential - the most important thing of all, I think. She also received **a presence**. And we do too. And it’s this presence that enables all of us to endure even the most difficult, most desperate, most fearful circumstances:

The Lord is with you.

Imagine a nighttime scene between a parent and their child. Many of you have lived this. Your child wakes with a cry of fear in the middle of the night, frightened by shapes and sounds that inhabit the nighttime space of little children.

You come to the room to see what’s wrong. Your child says, “I’m afraid.” You look under the bed and assure them that no one is there. You check the closet and behind the curtains and report “nothing there either.” But still your child is afraid. Because the fear lies deeper than monsters under the bed.

No logical and reasonable answer erases that kind of fear. Finally, you say, “Don’t be afraid, I’ll stay with you,” and you lie down on the bed with them until they fall asleep. With these words,

but mostly with **your presence**, the fear of the night is transformed because the night is now inhabited by your presence and assurance.

Isn't it true that the assurance of God's presence makes us stronger? Isn't it true that, when we can say, "The Lord is with me," confidence begins to bubble up inside of us?

It's not enough to be told, "Don't be afraid." We need to also be told, "I am with you."

When God calls us blessed, and when we know He is with us, even the seemingly bad situations take on purpose and become clothed in grace. When impossibilities line up in front of us like a firing squad, we've got to somehow get to the point that we can quiet our own souls enough to hear God whisper, "I think you are amazing; and I'm right here with you."

And if **we** can't quiet the chaos enough to hear God's word in our mind and heart, then we can read it in the Bible. All over the place God says,

I will not leave you nor forsake you. (Joshua 1:5)

Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9)

And if you don't have the strength to play seek and find with the Bible, then find someone - perhaps a friend from church - your own Gabriel - who can speak these words into your heart and your life for you.

When the car won't start and the children are climbing the walls;
When the refrigerator breaks right before Christmas;
When your parents just don't get it;
When your marriage is falling apart and it seems there's nothing you can do;
When the rising numbers of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID become too much to wrap your head around;
When the isolation and loneliness seem to have no end in sight, even with the vaccine....

These are moments to remember God's word. These are times tailor made for Romans 8 which says,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (v.38-9)

It is often said that God has a plan. But sometimes I wonder if it isn't more helpful to believe that God has a **promise**. That somehow - God will take all the different pieces: situations, experiences, challenges, lessons - somehow God will fit them together to make one beautiful picture called your life.

God is much more interested in seeing that the whole of your life works together for good, than He is in making sure that every circumstance is pleasant and that we lie down in a bed of roses every night.

You know as well as I do that struggle is a part of life. No doubt there are times when you - like Mary - have asked, "How can this be?" But if you have walked with God any time at all, you also know that when God speaks, He acts. You know that what God says, He does.

God's promise is true. And if we're still flinging our "Yeah, buts" back at Gabriel, we need to read to the end... Because this is the promise:

For with God, nothing will be impossible. (Luke 1:37)

Remember, God's not asking you to do the impossible thing - that's His department. But He might be asking you to do a hard thing, and so He blesses and encourages you and will give you what you need.

Those words brought Mary to the turning point, and her heart was able to trust them. And courage resounded in her response: (v.38)

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

I wonder what you are facing this Christmas season. I wonder what is causing you to ask, "How can this be?" I wonder what fears are causing you to wonder if you'll be able to make it through. Sure, we can all say, "the ongoing - longoing - COVID restrictions." But what else? What is behind the worries and fears you live with these days?

The Good News is not so much that **we** find **ourselves** somewhere between memory and hope this Advent, but rather that **GOD** is there/here between memory and hope with us.

The angel says, "The Lord is with you." The Lord is with you. That's what makes Mary's "yes" possible. That's the source of our courage and the ground on which our faith rests. Because there are plenty of things - wonderful things - seemingly impossible things - that God wants to accomplish with us and through us.

Just remember these two things:

God presence: The Lord Is With You

And the promise: For with God NOTHING is impossible. Nothing!

And may we respond with the confidence and humility of Mary,

Here we are Lord, let it be with us according to your word.

Amen.