

Sermon – 12/24/17
“Advent through Our Eyes”

Luke 1:26-38

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC

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During this Advent season we have been considering the Advent of the Christ from the vantage point of several characters. Each week we have looked through the eyes of a different individual in the biblical story to try and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the birth and second coming of Jesus Christ. The first week we considered the prophets, specifically Isaiah, as he comforted God’s people with the good news of God’s presence in the midst of wilderness. The Advent season reminds us of God’s promise to guide us through the darkness and uncertainty of life with a light that will never dim.

The second week we considered Mary and her song to God which spoke of the Kingdom breaking in to right the wrongs of the world. Mary reminded us of just how much God cares for the poor, the lowly, the marginalized, the excluded of our society and of just how important it is for us to join in that work of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Last week we considered John the Baptist who in his own fiery way, humbled himself as one who would prepare the way of the Lord. We were challenged to see where God is at work in the world and to do our own part to usher in God’s Kingdom, using our own voices in the wilderness, our own energies to work for justice, and our own resources to join with the Lord of all creation in realizing the Kingdom which has been born into the world, into our hearts, and into our homes.

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we are asked, through this story of Mary and the angel Gabriel, to think about what the coming of Christ looks like for us. As we consider the view of Advent through our own eyes it’s important to understand our own vantage point. Where do we stand? What do we see? Through what lenses do we choose to look? Are we fearful? Are we hopeful? Do we doubt? Do we ignore? Are we willing to take a closer look? Are we willing to look and listen with our hearts in such a way that we are open to God’s message and God’s call for us?

As we read this morning’s text we may wonder at how Mary could have so easily accepted the responsibility of being the one to carry the Christ-child. When she heard the news that God intended for her to give birth to the promised one – that one who would rule on King David’s throne forever – did she have a choice to say “No!”? What would have happened if Mary hadn’t been open to the message that Gabriel had brought to her?

The late Madeleine L’Engle in her writing described an old legend about Mary that suggests perhaps she was not the first young woman visited by the angel Gabriel. But she was the first one to say “Yes!” L’Engle writes imaginatively about how unsurprising it would be for some other fourteen-year-old girl to refuse the angel. To be disbelieving. Or to say: “Are you sure you mean –

But I’m unworthy –
I couldn’t anyhow –
I’d be afraid. No, no,
It’s inconceivable, you can’t be asking me –
I know it’s a great honor
But wouldn’t it upset them all,
Both our families?
They’re very proper, you see.
Do I have to answer now?
I don’t want to say no –
It’s what every girl hopes for
Even if she won’t admit it.
But I can’t commit myself to anything

This important without turning it over
In my mind for a while
And I should ask my parents
And I should ask my –
Let me have a few days to think it over.”
Sorrowfully, although not surprised
To have it happen again,
The angel returned to heaven.”ⁱ

But that wasn't the way it happened with Mary. For while the angel's message troubled her it also captivated her. "Greetings favored one." This wasn't the way Gabriel usually addressed people. I say usually – there are actually only 4 places in scripture where Gabriel's name is mentioned. Twice in Daniel and twice in Luke. Gabriel comes to Daniel in a vision and simply calls him, "Mortal." A second time he calls him by name.

In Luke, Gabriel first comes to Zechariah, and calls him by name. "Don't be afraid Zechariah." Later in the chapter Gabriel greets Mary with the phrase, "Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you!" And then again "Don't be afraid for you have found favor with God." Gabriel had Mary's attention.

The Greek word that is translated "favor" comes from the same word that is translated "grace". Gabriel could have just as easily said, "Greetings one graced by God." In our tradition we claim that God's grace is free and available to all. God so loved the world that God sent his only son Jesus so that through him all might have life. God's grace is not based on our merits, our abilities, our actions. It is not denied us because of our mistakes, our shortcomings, or our failures. God's grace means that God's arms are always open to us like the Father who welcomes the prodigal home or the mother who receives the crying child into her embrace. We are often reminded of God's amazing grace and never ending love - but to hear that spoken by God's messenger - the angel Gabriel - must have been jarring! "Mary – you have found favor with God."

If the angel said it to you would it be jarring to you? I imagine so! Have you, by the way, heard that good news? Do you believe it? "You have found favor with God!" Do you trust that good news? Sometimes I think we are so distracted by the material and cultural trappings of our world that we don't allow the news of God's grace to sink in? We become so dependent on our families and friends, our homes, our jobs, our 401ks, our life insurance policies, our abilities, our plans, etc. that we don't think we need God's grace to save us. We've got it covered. But the scriptures do give us a warning – we must be willing to lose our lives in order to find them. We must let go of all that we think we have obtained for ourselves in order to receive what God has for us.

When we heard Mary's song a couple of weeks ago we were reminded that Mary considered herself lowly. She was humble...she didn't have anything. There was nothing to distract her from the voice of God – from the messenger of God – from the grace of God. "Mary – you have found favor with God!"

We sometimes think of Mary as being especially chosen for her credentials. Maybe she was purer than others but Luke makes no mention of it. What seems to make Mary unique in this situation is that she recognizes that Gabriel is from God and she is open to receiving the message that he had for her. Though she was perplexed, confused, and bewildered, she was open and willing to consider this call from God.

Morton Kelsey in his book, The Drama of Christmas wonders what meeting with God's messenger might be like. He writes, "Most of us think we might like to have an encounter with a friendly angel. We forget that any such encounter strikes humans with a combination of awe, wonder, and terror. An experience of a real angel would be like looking over the edge of the Grand Canyon for the first time and seeing below us the ageless rocks laid out in a vast panorama; we would feel tiny and insignificant, a mere fragment of both space and time. An angel – an awesome, mysterious, numinous reality – would give us the feeling of the ineffable Holy, and we would need to be reminded in any such encounter that we have nothing to fear. The Holy not only gives humans an overwhelming sense of being loved but also makes demands on them just by appearing to them." He goes on to write, "I knew one man who started a practice of praying and keeping a journal and was making great progress, and then he stopped; he told me he had seen some light, and he didn't like it."

So I wonder - does the light of the divine comfort us or unsettle us? Or is it a combination of the two? Is the Advent of Christ – the coming of the Lord – something that we are open to or something that we run away from or deny altogether or fight?

Maybe we've never encountered an angel but maybe we have heard a message of what God's Kingdom is like and it scared us because of what it might mean we had to give up. Are we afraid that if we **really** listen...if we **really** are willing to do what God asks of us...that it would be too much for us? That we would have to give up too much? That we would have to surrender too much of the life that we have created for ourselves in order to walk in the ways of God? Let me suggest that though it may seem scary – when we trust in God's grace for us – God's favor for us – it is possible. "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary caught the vision of what God was up to and she wanted in. She said "Yes!" Gabriel told her about this child who was coming – that he would be the fulfillment of the promise made to King David centuries before – that his Kingdom would have no end. God was up to something – and it would be foolish to resist it. It would be foolish to run from it. It would be foolish to pretend that it wasn't happening. True life was found in the center of this call and as scary and as difficult as it might be it was worth it.

When we look at Advent that is what we are invited to see...that God has come and is still on the move accomplishing God's purposes in the world. We are invited to participate in what God is doing. That means we have to let go of some of the things that we want to do and position ourselves to listen to and respond to the message of God as it comes to us. We have to let go of our own agendas and sign on for God's agenda. We have to look at the world through new eyes just as we look at Advent through new eyes. Perhaps we need to ask for God's help in giving us new eyes to see.

God will help us see beyond ourselves, our prejudices, our agendas, our fears. God will help us see one another more clearly and God will help us respond to the needs of others rather than selfishly thinking only of ourselves. God will help us see that the woman who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day and is rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.

God will help us see that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who is trying to help us through the check-out counter is a worried 19-year-old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.

God will help us see that the lonely looking man who is begging for money in the same spot every day is a slave to an addiction that he can't escape on his own.

God will help us see that the elderly couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking our shopping progress are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will probably be the last year that they go Christmas shopping together.

God will help us see more clearly the needs of those around us. And God will open our hearts and move us to act to bring healing and hope and love to those with whom we come into contact each day.

God will speak grace to us and invite us to trust in that grace to be sufficient for us as we surrender our lives to the one whose Kingdom has come.

I still haven't watched the animated version of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" this year. It is one of my favorite stories. It is the classic tale of "Scrooge" - whose heart is changed, who is given new eyes, and who is transformed into a force for good in the world.

The Grinch tried to stop Christmas from coming but realized that he couldn't. It was going to come anyway – no matter what he did. And he could either be a part of the wonder of the gift or be miserable in his shallow and hollow existence.

“And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”ⁱⁱ

Our eyes can get just a little blurry this time of year with all the busyness of our culture and world. We can easily become convinced that life is all about these things rather than the things of God. But the Advent stories invite us to imagine something else. Christmas/Life means a little bit more. Be still and listen to the angel's message. The Advent of Christ is upon us and God is doing something amazing in our midst. The child is being born – God's Kingdom is near – and we have found favor with God! Will you have eyes to see it, ears to hear the good news, and faith enough to say “YES” to God when you are called to respond? May it be so!

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Madeleine L'Engle, And It Was Good: Reflections on Beginnings (Wheaton Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1983) pp. 250-251

ⁱⁱ Theodor Seuss Geisel, The Grinch Who Stole Christmas