

## “Labor of Love”

### Sermon – December 24, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

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“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

You are a poor, teenage girl around 14 years old, alone in backwater fishing village that isn’t even mentioned in any writings of your time including scripture, and set to marry a carpenter maybe 19 years old. And a male that you somehow perceive to be heavenly being suddenly appears and gives you this greeting. How do you react?

Well, for Mary verse 29 of Luke chapter 1 uses the Greek word *diatarassó* [dee-at-ar-AS-so]. The NRSV translates it as “much perplexed” but more accurately would be “greatly agitated” even to the point of being terrified. A unique experience, apparently, as the word that appears nowhere else in the New Testament

A related word is used a few verses early when the same messenger (literally what “angel” means in Greek and Hebrew) named Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple to tell him his elderly wife Elizabeth will bear a son who becomes John the Baptist.

Verse 29 goes on to say Mary “pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” But it is more like \*debating\*, her mind racing to try to figure this all out. Who is this messenger? Is he really from Yahweh? What does he want? What the heck does he want with me? Is he going to hurt me?

The angel then responds with the most used phrase in the Bible, “Fear not” (or “Do not be afraid”), follow by “you have found favor with God.”

Mary probably relaxes just a bit not worried about immediate danger but you can bet she’s probably thinking to herself thinking, “I have found favor with God—annnddd...?” because in the New Testament, words of assurance have purpose. They offer comfort when the status quo is about to be altered and the rhythms of the everyday about to be disrupted. You

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don't get a message from God saying, “Hey, just wanted to tell you to keep trucking along; it's all good. Same-o, same-o.” No, you can bet things are going to change. You are going to change.

Sure enough, Gabriel rattles off seven major pronouncements to Mary including that she will get pregnant, bear a son, name him Jesus, he'll be great, Yahweh will give him the throne of David, he'll reign over the house of David, and his kingdom will have no end.

Talk about getting hit with a fire hose of mind-blowing information and completely unfathomable. You could forgive her if her response was, <sarcastically> “Oh, that's all? I'm going to get pregnant—somehow—and bear a son—that you've already named for me—who is Son of the Most High and he'll rule forever? And here I thought it was going to be something important.”

Instead, she replies, <earnestly> “How will this be since I have not known a man?”

She must be incredulous and, despite the words of assurance, somewhat anxious, though apparently curious. If she's never had sex, how can she get pregnant? And if she does get pregnant outside her marriage, she will be ostracized by her family and the community, so how's that going to work out?

Gabriel tells 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.”

I'm not sure I would have found this comforting. But there were legends that Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar (among others) also were

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virgin births and, hence, each one called himself a “Son of God”, so maybe Mary just accepted that these things can happen.

But the thing that probably cements for Mary it is Gabriel then saying, essentially, “Oh, by the way, your elderly ‘cousin’ Elizabeth, of all people, is already six months pregnant, so see nothing is impossible with God.”

It was the assurance that another woman, someone she knew well, would walk with her during this uncertain journey that convinced Mary.

Elizabeth likely understood Mary’s predicament more than anyone else, and it was the prospect of a shared experience that mattered to Mary more than any of those grand promises from Gabriel.

For people at the margins facing difficult situations, what matters most is someone who will share in their experience, stand with them, and walk with them.

That’s also the story of incarnation in this passage. Not simple assurances that God cares for us but the fact that God will share in the human experience and journey with us in our everyday lived contexts.

Mary finally says to Gabriel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Clearly, Mary was special. Somehow, somehow in only three short verses, Mary radically transforms from peasant girl to prophet, from Mary to mother of God, from to denial to discipleship.

She is not a meek, timid person, looking for excuses to get out of it, saying “Why me?” She is one who thoughtfully yet boldly takes on the responsibility that has been thrust upon her without regard for the social and physical strain that would come for a poor pregnant girl in ancient Palestine.

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So, she is not responding to Gabriel in a soft, submissive voice with head bowed but rather in a spirit of: “Yes! All right! Let’s do this thing!”

Our understanding of Mary comes principally from Luke’s gospel as

Matthew only talks about her five times, Mark once, and John not at all.

The church has often had a difficult time knowing how to regard Mary. In some traditions she has been exalted to a status approaching that of deity. In others, she tends to get ignored—except at Christmas time.

Many have taken her to be a model of motherhood. Recently, she has been valued more generically as a woman. Indeed, she sometimes becomes a role model for feminist identification: Mary the Virgin has known no man; she is her own person, unexploited; her identity is not given to her by any male, but is her own, a gift from God.

The evangelist Luke, though, as we have seen, does not exalt Mary as a goddess, or as a mother, or even as a woman. He thinks she has a more important role—as the ideal Christian. In Luke’s Gospel, Mary becomes the model for Christian discipleship, the person whom all people, men and women alike should emulate, especially if they wish to follow her son.

Mary is not blessed because she is going to be the physical mother of Jesus. She is blessed because she believed God's word. So, whatever blessing accrues to Mary is one we all can share—if we emulate her. We cannot all be physical parents of Jesus, but we can believe God's word will be fulfilled and that is what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Mary turns out to be not simply the mother of Jesus but an ideal role model for all followers of Jesus: a servant of God who embodies faith and

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faithfulness. She accepts her role as a labor of love. She expects no reward, no exaltation. She does it out of her love of God.

And that is the radical truth. Namely, that true faith is alive only when it is infused with, characterized by, and empowered through divine, transformative cruciform love.

The obedience of active, loving faith glorifies God because it transforms individuals and the world through the power of divine love into the image of divine love. Through the exercise of the obedience of faith, the will to power is re-framed by the renunciation of power.

The paradox of divine love results in heavenly redemptive humility rather than human regal haughtiness. The Son of God is not an emperor lording over subjects. The Son of God is one who subjects himself to serving others out of love.

And so, it is apropos that the fourth Advent candle that we lit early was for love.

It is also apropos that it is called the Angels’ Candle. It reminds us of the heavenly host that announced the good news of our Savior's birth that began with the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel.

So let us go forth with the message of God’s redemptive love. And in the spirit of Mary, let us stand boldly and fear not, saying: “Yes! All right! Let’s do this thing!”

In the name of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.