

4th Sunday in Advent
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

“Are you ready for Christmas?” I couldn’t begin to add up the amount of times I have been asked this challenging question by friends, coworkers, and store clerks throughout the years. No one likes the thought of being unprepared, especially at Christmas when there are so many things we need to do.

Whenever our lives get busy it’s important that we don’t become overwhelmed. We need to be watchful that our Christmas preparation and *head celebration of Jesus* does not distract us from our *heart relationship with Jesus*.

In the opening chapters of Luke we are introduced to a few individuals whose hearts were prepared to “receive their King.” Individuals like Mary, Simeon, Anna, and the Shepherds. Although they lived at a different time, and were under different circumstances from our lives in the present, we can know that the things we see in their hearts can also be in ours.

When the book of Luke begins there was no Christmas Season. “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night” had not yet been written. The #1 song for believers at that time might have been entitled, “How Long, O Lord? How Long?” The story of Mary begins in Luke’s first chapter, during a very dark time in the history of her people. Nearly 400 years had passed and the Jewish people were still waiting for the promised Messiah.

In the words of Jeremiah the prophet (Jer 23:5-6)

“See, days are coming when I will raise up a righteous branch for David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security.

This is the name to be given him: “The Lord our justice.”

It is in the midst of this darkness, that God’s spotlight shines the brightest. Mary is about to receive the greatest blessing ever given to any woman – or any person, for that matter!

When Mary awoke on the day the angel Gabriel was going to pay her a visit, she had no idea who was coming to her house, or what the reason for the visit would be. She didn’t know this was God’s appointed time for the promise of the Messiah to be fulfilled, and she didn’t know she was to be God’s chosen one to carry the life of the Savior within her.

Mary's story is one of a heart prepared for God's visitation. When Mary first heard the words that Gabriel spoke to her, she was puzzled and responded with her mind. None of it made sense and so she asked, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" When the angel gave her more details, Mary's next response was not from her mind, but from her heart. She knew this was not a time to reason, but a time to believe.

To paraphrase her response: "I hear and receive your words, for I know they are God's Words. I will keep them and cherish them in my heart. I am God's servant-vessel and welcome God to do in me all that has been promised." This is an amazing, in-the-moment (in the here-and-now) response from a young, engaged, teenage girl who just heard she was about to become pregnant through the working of the Holy Spirit.

How amazing is it that this young woman, no older than a teenager, would be the one God chose to change the world. Imagine her surprise when she received the news. What are you talking about, angel, calling me "favored one." Who me?! You must have the wrong person, Gabriel. God would never choose me.

How often have we heard those words come out of our own mouths? God would never choose me. I imagine there is more than one of us here who has thought if not said aloud those very words. But what makes us think we are less worthy to carry out the will of God? Well, this is precisely how Mary felt. She believed what the angel was telling her but she had difficulty accepting her own worthiness. **Say it isn't so...but it was - the angel said so!**

I'm sure I would have taken much longer to get to the place of acceptance. How amazing it is she ponders this news for such a short while and then tells the angel to count her in. She will do whatever it is God asks of her.

Mary didn't resist or argue. She didn't offer another option or try to come up with a better plan. She didn't try to put the angel off or ask for a few more weeks to think it over. She didn't say, "This is not a good time for me! I love what you said and want to be the one chosen for this amazing privilege, but could it happen after I'm married so I won't have the stigma of carrying a child without a husband."

Did her heart skip a beat when she said 'Yes'? There she is - teen head tilted high, her hands trembling just a bit, wide-eyed and nervous, questioning but not afraid. She was wondering but not terrified, unsure but not uncertain.

There is more to this process than simply hearing the promise. There is one more thing that has to happen. Something Mary did or there would have been no birth of the Christ child. This is not something God does, but something we do. **Something we need to do or there will be no birth of Christ within us.**

What was needed to move from the impossible to the miraculous is contained in Mary's reaction to this news. Listen carefully to the response that ushered in this incredible miracle...she says, "here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." The key to this story is Mary's belief. It takes a willing spirit to hear the words of God. **It takes a believing heart to actually understand this to be Good News.**

Mary's heart was ready to trust, and ready to receive. It was a listening heart, a yielded heart, and a welcoming heart! It was a heart that heard God's promise, and a heart of faith that was reassured by the words, "With God nothing will be impossible."

Perhaps tomorrow we will like Mary say "here I am the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." As we remember Jesus' birth and the first Christmas, our hearts can also welcome the reality of His presence. As we experience one of the busiest times of the year we can be assured that the peace of the Christ will fill our hearts if we let Him in.

May our faith respond to His presence and to His promises, and may our hearts-response to Him always be, "Let Your will be done in me according to all that You have spoken."

When the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God," Mary took a deep breath and said, "**BE IT UNTO ME AS YOU HAVE SAID.**"

And with those words -- **CHRISTMAS CAME INTO THE WORLD.**

Deacon Gregory J Cecere

December 23, 2017 (4th advent)

(excerpts by Pastor Wayne Lawson, Baptist Minister and Lynne M. Dolan)