

1st Advent 2019

The reading is taken from Luke chapter one beginning at verse 26 the birth of Jesus fortold

in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. To a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The Virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be, but the angel said to her do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great to more be called the Son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. How will this speed Mary asked the Angel, since I'm a Virgin, the Angel answered the Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the most high will overshadow you.

So the Holy One to be born will be called the son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her six month. For no word from God will ever fail. I am the Lord's servant Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her

Today marks the beginning of a different season, a different time, not just for our December services. It is the season of Advent where I'll be encouraging you to refocus on the heart of the Christian story, the incarnation that is the birth of Jesus. We're going to be thinking about how God has made himself present among his people throughout the story of scripture.

We're going to be thinking about why this actually matters and about how that affects how we live out our faith, live our life, and our calling... today. So I encourage you this morning to leave behind the everyday, the boring, the ordinary and to rediscover the beauty and the wonder of the Christian story of the God who comes to dwell with us.

Has anybody here ever been approached by a child where they speak to you in a way where you just know that they want something. Can anybody able to identify with that? Have you ever been that child that has approached somebody when you just really want something, because when a child wants something small, they just kind of say, Hey dad can I have some orange juice? In a normal way? That's how normal people speak.

But I know from experience with my children wants something really big they ask in a different way, don't they? There's kind of a charm offensive that happens preceding the question. It goes something like this, dad you know that I think you're brilliant, you're kind and you're amazing, can I do a job for you?. And I'm thinking here.... go on. And as a parent, I'm just thinking, I know that there's something more coming here. This isn't about something small, something big is coming down the track.

And so I just kind of let them carry on. Eventually, once they've got all of that out of their system, we end up asking them the \$64,000 question, which is what? It's, what do you want?

You know that there's something behind the preamble.

Well, when I was reading today's reading, I kind of felt a little bit of this in the reading, and I'm not saying that the angel Gabriel was on a flattery offensive with Mary, but there's an interesting kind of a bit of dialogue first. So he shows up and the first thing he says is... Greetings you who are highly favoured the Lord is with you.

It can sound a bit like flattery, probably isn't, and it's probably theologically wrong, but it just sounds a bit like that initially. I'll go into why it's not flattery later..... but there's this kind of preamble that happens.

It says, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

So you can see she's curious, she wants to know what this is actually all about.

There's the initial preamble, the initial kind of talk, but she's knowing there's something big.

I mean, for a start, if an angel shows up, you know it's going to be something big anyway, don't you?

And so an angel turns up and begins talking to her, and her reaction is she's worried, you know, she's troubled at his words, and it says she wonders what kind of greeting this might be. So she's thinking, what's this about? Why are you here? What do you want from me? And sure enough, the angel does break some pretty massive news to Marythat she is going to be what's known as the Theotokos, the God-bearer. That Mary in many ways was a very ordinary person, but she had this extraordinary unique calling. She's the only person in history that has born God, that she is this Theotokos, this God-bearer, this person to give birth to God.

And so Gabriel gives her this message that God is going to inhabit your womb. What do you do with that kind of news? What do you do when an angel shows up and tells you that you're going to give birth to God?

Well, Mary, as the angel speaks to her goes through a very natural process of beginning to grasp what this is all about. It says she's greatly troubled, and you would be, wouldn't you if an angel shows up. She wonders what's going on. It says she's highly confused. There's clearly fear.... and sometimes we think of angels and every depiction of angels seems to be like a four-year-old girl about this tall with some little wings strapped on. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be that afraid of that.

You know when angels turn up and generally the first thing they say is, "Don't be afraid" because they're pretty awesome.

She's perplexed. It says, how will this be since I'm a Virgin? She's just wrestling with the sheer biological impossibility and absurdity of the situation. I'm a Virgin I've never had sex. How can I possibly give birth to God?

However, by the time the angel finishes talking to Mary, this transformation has kind of begun to take place in quite a major way. She seems to have submitted and been fully committed to what God is calling her too, as he leaves her she says, "**I'm the Lord's servant, may your word be fulfilled in me**".

How does she make that transition so quickly from, Oh my goodness this is crazy too, Okay, that's okay. What is the source of this rapid reassurance? What I believe is because of what the angel says to her in verse 35. He says **the Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the most high will overshadow you**.

To us, this language of overshadowing might be quite strange. Like what does that mean to have God overshadow you. But as a Jew and somebody who would have grown up immersed in the scriptures, that word would have rung out. It would have been like this kind of bell ringing in her ears. This is familiar, this is something from the scriptures.

And the word overshadow occurs only four times in the Old Testament. Probably the most significant use of this word, the most significant occurrence is in relation to the divine cloud overshadowing the Tabernacle in Exodus 40- 35 where God infuses the Tabernacle with his divine glory and presence. There would have been echoes of that overshadowing in Mary's mind.

So in context, it would have been hugely significant because for Mary it would have had this unshakeable resonance with this past event where God drew close to His people, the people of Israel, and God through

Gabriel's words, is showing Mary that as with the tabernacle, he would infuse Mary with his divine glory and presence.

Isn't that awesome?

Why is this story so important? Why is this comparison so important?

Well, it's significant because the narrative in the Old Testament and the new reveals a God who chooses to draw close to his people. In the old Testament, in Exodus 25:8-9 God says to Moses, **“have them’.... that is the people of Israel,‘make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them. Make this Tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern that I will show you”**. He's saying, get ready..... get ready, I'm coming among you, my presence is coming. I'm coming to live with you. Isn't that amazing.

And so chapters 25 to 40 in Exodus then proceed to follow the activity of this community of Israel as they prepare for the arrival of the manifest presence of God. The God of Israel in this season has given them super detailed instructions about how to build everything, how to build the ark of the covenant, how to build the temple, what to make the lampstand out of, what to make the table out of. All of these things He gives them these really detailed instructions to get ready, to get ready for my presence. It's has to be special.

How-ever the people of Israel basically begin on this journey to get ready for the presence of God. That He's going to come in glory and fill the Tabernacle, to fill the holiest place, but then by chapter 32 things begin to slip. It begins to go sideways, go seriously wrong.

And so Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive the 10 commandments and he comes down only to find that the people have turned their backs ... on him.

They don't know their leaders are gone, like, what, what do we do? Moses isn't here anymore. He's like the kind of representation of kind of God in their midst, not representation of God, but like he represents and he's kind of that go-between, between them and God, and they're kind of lost. And so to kind of unloose themselves, they go, let's, let's make a new focus. So they make another god, they make this golden calf and they begin worshiping this golden calf.

They'd been unfaithful and so following this, God punishes Israel for their unfaithfulness. You know, there is a season here of discipline. It involves some pretty serious discipline. *Go read it.*

But in this God ultimately remains faithful to his people. It's not like he just goes, that's it you made a calf, we're done here. You guys have blown it, I'm off. His desire to remain with them stays the same. There is no plan B, there is plan A all the way. Plan a for Israel was to get ready for the arrival of their God and even though they totally blew it from God's point of view, plan A is plan A.

I'm still coming guys. I'm still going to live among you. I'm still going to presence myself among you. You might be unfaithful. You might be rejecting Me, but I'm not going to reject you. I'm going to stand by you and I'm coming. Carry on, getting ready there is no plan B. And so chapters 35 to 40 show Israel having kind of repented and come back with this renewed commitment to the work God had called them to, and to holiness. Intent on being prepared for the coming glory of God. And then finally, at the end of chapter 40 when all the work is done, it says, **Moses set up the courtyard around the Tabernacle and altar and puts up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard and so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud overshadowed the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.** God was good on his promise.

Are you ready for the coming of the Lord?... Are we ready, I wonder? This story for me is, amazing it reminds us that God doesn't come to us because we're perfect. He comes to us as an act of, just, grace. The Israelites didn't deserve God to stick to plan A, like he could have easily stuck to a plan B.

That's what I would have done, like, no way these guys are crazy, but God didn't. He's not like Tony Wescott. Praise the Lord. He is good. He's faithful all the time.

So he comes as an act of grace. Israel was at some points in their journey, rebellious and messy and unfaithful but God chose to be among them.

And Mary too, in many ways she was an unexceptional teenager, and then we make statues of her all over the place. For some reason, I think Mary would be horrified.

I think Mary's heart was one of humility and is the same as John the Baptist... pointing to Jesus pointed. It's him, it's him.

It's not her. She was a teenager. She was just there and God chose her. And I don't know, I don't have all the answers as to why. Why that is? But she was this unexceptional teenager approached by this angel to be the vessel for incubating the Son of God, not because she was perfect. The words **highly favoured**, what sounds like a flattery offensive is not a flattery offensive. The words highly favoured that Gabriel uses have their roots in the word Charisse, meaning grace. When we think of the phrase highly favored, we might think of it describing people that are successful, the elite, the high rollers, the high achievers, the people that have it, the people that have it sorted, they've got everything in place and worked out.

But here, to be highly favoured simply means.... that Mary for reasons she cannot possibly fathom has been chosen.

What do you do with that? She was selected for this high calling through nothing she had done, but simply because as God says to Moses in Exodus 33:19 **"I'll be gracious to whom I'll be gracious and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.** This grace and presence that we see in Exodus and in Luke reaches a climax at Pentecost when the prophecy in Joel 2:28 comes to be, **"he says, and it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions"**

In this prophecy God was revealing that there would be a time when his Holy Spirit would be given, not just to specific people, at specific times, nor would it remain just for the people of Israel. But that he would come to live in, and among all those who welcomed him at Pentecost, God's presence truly broke out. It broke out beyond the confines of the tabernacle. It broke out beyond the walls of the temple, ripping the curtain. You know when the curtain tore in half from top to bottom, that Gentiles in the court of the Gentiles could see all the way through the temple and into the Holy of Holies.

Isn't it amazing that God rips the curtains and he's saying, I'm for everybody now, take a look, it's not just for the one person once a year who can go in with a string tied around his foot, you know, having prepared himself for weeks for that moment? This time for everyone, you can see right in.

He broke out beyond the confines of Mary's womb and beyond the confines of Jesus's flesh even. The God presence is himself among us.

God's presence broke out in this way so that we the church might become the new Tabernacles, that we might become the temple, that we would become a place where His presence dwells.

But if we really think about it, there is a question that we should probably ask at this point, and that is, why is this such good news for us anyway? Why? Why? Why is this? Why? Why did God engineer it this way so

that we would be little tabernacles, little temples, all walking around Hillcrest with the presence of God in us? What's that for? What's that about? Well, firstly, Jesus said that we'd be better off having the Holy Spirit with us than actually having Jesus walking by our sides.

I'm just going to say that again so you can take it in. Jesus said that we would be better off having the Holy Spirit with us and in us now, than having Jesus here, now. In John 6:7 Jesus says to his disciples, **very truly, I tell you it is for your good that I'm going away. Unless I go away the Holy Spirit will not come to you.**

I don't know about you, but whenever I think about the disciple I sometimes think they had like an unfair advantage. Does anybody else feel that? I kind of go, if I had three years walking around with Jesus, I'd be like a super disciple. Come on guys you had three years with Jesus, you should be like, perfect, surely. I just feel like it would have been great just walking with Jesus and talking with him in the flesh. Sitting and listen to the sermon on the Mount, passing bread, fish to one another at the same table, asking questions.

But here it says that having the Holy Spirit with us and in us, that presence of God that we have now... in this place is better than seeing Jesus in the flesh, is better than having him here.

And secondly, if we look at the people of Israel, post Exodus. If we look at Mary at the moment of her calling, and if we look at the disciple's pre and post Pentecost we can see that there is something about the presence of God, which brings courage brings courage. That God's presence transforms us. He changes us. He makes us bold. He makes us brave. He can help us to step out and do things that terrify us.

You know, when Israelite armies went into battle it was the ark of the covenant that went out in front, it was the presence of God. This is going out in front. Now, later on, they got it wrong at times and they started relying on the box rather than God, which is a bad idea. But initially, it was like if God doesn't go out in front of us, we are not going. God gave them courage. God gave them confidence.

When Mary realized that God would overshadow her and protect her. This enabled her to carry out this calling, to switch from fear to just humility and service quickly because she knew that God's presence would be with her. And when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit they knew that God was with them. He enabled them to just make enormous sacrifices and to go on to do extraordinary things for the sake of Jesus. And this is why this matters.

God's presence with us, and in us isn't about us just having a nice warm, fuzzy feeling on a Sunday where we kind of go, Oh, God's presence. It's so that, there's God's presence so that we can be part of his plan to transform the world. That we can go out, we can love people in a way that we can't love them on our own. That we can serve people in a way that we can't serve people our own.

Mary, Mary, couldn't have possibly have lived the life that she lived without the courage from God. I mean, she saw her Son crucified. How do you do that without God's presence in your life? You can't. I just...you can't your just guttered.

God's presence has a massive **SO THAT** attached to it. We can't think of it just as, Oh, let's get filled with the Holy Spirit and go, that was a great service. It's not so that we can do that. **So that** we can be agents of change going into the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has taught us.

So as I begin to wrap this up, do you know that God.... is ... with you.... today?

Now, do you know that He is here and that He will give you courage for your calling? That as God, it usually happens afterward, by the way and often. You, kind of make the decision to go and do it, and then

God kind of goes, okay, you've been obedient now, I'm going to give you some courage. It'd be nice to have a big download of courage first, wouldn't it? That's what I'd always want, but it seems to be the way it works.

And God, God does that. He shows up, we go, I'm going to trust you and then the courage download comes into our-life.

Do you know that God is with you? You know it might be you feel that just like the Israelites, that you've blown it. Maybe you've made a huge mistake. Maybe you have made your golden calf and you just think no way is God going to be with me anymore.

His plan A is His plan A people, he's not going anywhere. Yeah you might make your golden calf every week and blow it and then go back to him on Thursday or whatever. His plan A, he's going to presence Himself with us. My prayer for you this morning is that you would know that He is with you and that he's calling you to follow Him, and that calling may be a complete joy. It may be something just, Oh, this is like my heart's desire. It may be that, that calling is kind of mysterious this taste is showing you a day at a time and you're like, I don't know quite what this is your calling me to, us to? God's revealing it only a bit at a time. And I don't, I don't know where I'm going, but I'm trusting God and it might be that actually your calling is a take up your cross thing. Know the disciples or Peter had this prophesy spoken over him about, you know, **one day you'll go and you'll be led where you don't want to go.** And he told Peter, **you're going to be crucified, mate.** And he was, there wasn't like a get-out clause.

Sometimes calling will mean suffering. It just will. But God's presence is with us we are people who have His presence.

I pray that in this particular season of advent, when we anticipate the arrival of the King, that we like Mary would take courage. That we might be humbleand that we might say with one voice, as Mary said, we are the Lord's servants. May your word be fulfilled in us so that we might see the world changed through Him.

Let's stand. I just want to pray for us this morning. God is speaking to me at the moment about calling, about going somewhere about doing something. He's calling us out of where we are now. You get that sense I don't know if any of you have experienced this, but sometimes when you're in a place and you're settled and then God's calling you out, you feel like a fish out of water.

You feel like itchy feet like, I'm here, but I'm not kind of meant to be here or know that God is calling us on. Are we meant to be going somewhere else? Are we meant to be doing something else? I don't know what it is, but I know that that's the case. I want to pray for us that we will receive courage to actually do it, to step out because the calling can come and we can miss it. It is possible to miss the call of God and to ignore it.

let's pray. Look, God, we thank you for your word.

We thank you, Lord, for your kindness. That you would choose to be with us when you could choose not to. We thank you for the story of us as people that grafted into Israel. Thank you for our spiritual ancestors who in a year they made mistakes and they blew it, but they, they prepared for you, Lord.

They prepared for you. They waited for you and you came. And we thank you, Lord, that You presence yourself among them. Lord, thank you for Mary for her obedience and the call on her life. That you called an ordinary teenage girl to be the God-bearer. I know. I believe you've got a call on all of our lives.

Lord, we thank you for your Holy Spirit, that you are with us now and that you can give us the courage to follow the call on our lives, and our life together in this church.