

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. It's not quite Christmas...yet. We're still waiting and preparing. As we wait, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen for a word from God.

READ Luke 1:26-45.

German Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said that "The celebration of Advent is possible only for those of us who are troubled in soul, who know we are poor and imperfect, who look forward to something greater to come (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). If ever there was a time when we are looking forward to something greater to come, it is now. My goodness what a time of waiting it has been! When I saw medical workers receiving vaccinations this week, my eyes welled up with tears. Knowing that a vaccine is out there, I felt some hope. Not just that, but I noticed a shift within allowing me to dream about what is to come: hugging others, singing hymns while worshiping side-by-side, eating together. Even in the midst of our grief and disappointment, I am hopeful that sometime in 2021, we will be able to safely do these things again. You see, I miss being with people. Don't you? We, as humans, need each other. We find that also in today's scripture.

Yes, we find ourselves in different times than before- and so did Mary. Did you know that before the angel Gabriel appeared to Elizabeth's husband, the priest, Zechariah, and then to Mary that it had been about 400 years since the Israelites had heard a message from God?! Can you imagine going generations without hearing one word from God? And when that word finally comes, of course we assume it would come to a priest in the Temple but not to an unknown teenage girl from a small town?! The angel, Gabriel, shows up one day to Mary and says,

“Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you” (v.28). This Advent story stirs up a lot of wonder for me. I wonder if Mary felt overwhelmed when she heard she was favored by God? Was she caught off guard or comforted to learn that God was with her? No wonder she was much perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. It’s a big, surprising greeting to absorb from a divine messenger. We aren’t told much else about Mary or her family at all in scripture. And yet so many of us have made up our own stories about her. “Mary does not know her life is about to be both upended and established forever in the history of humankind. We have the advantage of knowing what is next in this story, but Mary does not know why an angel would disrupt the normal course of her life” (workingpreacher.org, Courtney V. Buggs). I grew up in a small town here in SC that has one stoplight. One of the jokes often said about Great Falls is that if you blink driving through town, you’ll completely miss it. It is definitely a pass through on the way to somewhere else. “Nazareth was such a backwater town that the first thing Nathanael, a disciple who speaks in John’s Gospel, said about Jesus was, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth (1:46)’” (*The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling)? And yet, this is the kind of town in which the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Son of God. I’m sure that this news had to be disorienting, bewildering and a lot to process for anyone, let alone a small town teenager. Just the greeting alone is a lot to process, especially the favored by God part. What does that mean anyway- to be favored by God? Some believe Mary to be an extra-holy saint, praised for her holiness, purity and obedience but there is nothing in scripture that indicates she was free from sin. Others believe that Mary was more like you and me- ordinarily human. To be favored doesn’t mean you’re privileged in terms of money or power nor does it mean that you’re free

from sin. God freely chooses whomever God chooses from whatever walks of life and gifting them for certain tasks.

How many of us know and humbly receive that we're also favored or graced by God? Or how many of us have forgotten the unmerited favor by which we have been saved? Favor or grace is not something we can earn nor is it deserved. It is a gift from God. Gabriel didn't make this announcement to Herod's daughter or a member of elite Jewish society; he made it to a poor, small town Jewish girl named Mary. This Advent story "reminds us that God moves in and among those whom society most often leaves behind, that the thread of redemption woven throughout Scripture winds its way through a lot of small towns and seemingly little lives" (Darling).

In the midst of Mary's pondering, Gabriel tells her not to be afraid, as angels seem to do in the Bible, but we aren't told that she IS afraid. I would've been afraid but again, we don't know. Gabriel again tells Mary that she has found favor with God. Maybe she and we need to hear it again?! And then Gabriel drops some crazy news. I wonder what Mary felt upon hearing this wild news? Maybe the question she asked is the first one that came out of her mouth, "How can this be, since I'm a virgin" (v. 34b)? Is this a voice of doubt or just common sense in knowing how things are supposed to work? "Instead of correcting and silencing Mary, the angel explains to her what is about to happen to her and even points to her older cousin, Elizabeth, as proof of the reliability of his word" (*Connections*, Eric D. Barreto). Here Gabriel offers Mary a sign...an incredible promise. Elizabeth, who is past her birthing years and up to this point has been unable to conceive a child,

is pregnant. “For nothing,” Gabriel says, “is impossible with God” (v. 37). At this news, Mary courageously and faithfully says yes to God. “Here I am” (v. 38a). She doesn’t say, “Thanks but no thanks” or, “Yeah, I do kinda got it goin on, don’t I” (Stephanie Crowder, *When Momma Speaks*)? On the contrary, when Mary says yes to God, it is fierce, as she has pondered enough to take this first huge step in faith. Her yes isn’t because she has to but because she wants to. As a matter of fact, at this point in her journey she doesn’t know if Joseph will stick by her or not. Regardless, Mary chooses to embrace this call, to become a prophet who will bear the Savior of the world in both voice and body. She chooses to see God in the world and to trust that God is at work even in things she can’t see, or understand, or imagine. In accepting God’s promise, Mary becomes the first to believe the good news of Jesus” (Barreto). Mary did not simply submit, she dreamed with God, aligned her hopes, plans and actions with God. And with that affirmative response, Gabriel left. I wonder if this encounter with the angel felt like a dream to Mary?! Did her mind spin as she pondered the impossibility of it all? Did she fully grasp the gravity of her call...of what she had signed up for...said yes to (Hannah Garrity, *A Sanctified Art*)?

I wonder if the reason Mary went to visit Elizabeth some 80 miles outside of Nazareth was to confirm the angel Gabriel’s news?! Or maybe she wasn’t ready to tell Joseph and needed to not feel so weird or alone? Or maybe Mary goes because she just needs Elizabeth? Again we don’t really know why Mary went, we just know that God gave Mary & Elizabeth to each other. You know when God sends a person just when you need it?! Can’t you just see their embrace upon their tender reunion? I love artist Hannah Garrity’s depiction of them holding on

to each other in the piece featured on the front of your bulletin. In their embrace theirs is not a dream deferred; it's a dream confirmed, a dream shared. A dream that will birth joy" (*A Sanctified Art*). Upon Mary's greeting, she receives a surprising reaction from the unborn John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb! At the mere sound of Mary's voice, John leaps for joy. Even though John is yet to be born, he is already preparing the way for the Lord. One scholar put it this way- "The one is old and her son will close an age; the other is young and her son will usher in the new" (Interpretation Series). John will serve Jesus. Even in prenatal activity, God's sovereign will is evident.

Elizabeth is the first human to come into contact with Mary after Gabriel's visit. She is the first one to hear what Mary has to say, maybe because she's the first one willing to listen? They exchange vulnerability. I'm sure Elizabeth is glad to have the company, as her husband, Zechariah, was made mute by Gabriel during the time of her pregnancy for not believing that Elizabeth would conceive. I wonder when it was that Joseph found out this news? Most of the time when we think of who should know this wonderful, world-changing news- we think of important and powerful people being in the know. But here- Luke has two, ostracized women to be each other's support and community while together trusting in God's redemptive plan for the world. Isn't it crazy both the way and who God chooses to communicate God's love? We're told that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophetically bestows a blessing on Mary. In it Elizabeth proclaims that Mary carries not just any beloved child but her Lord. Think about a time when you've received a message or a call from God that was hard to believe. With whom did you share your fears, doubts, faith, joy, etc.? Elizabeth and Mary

encourage and support one another in their unusual circumstances. We, too, are called to carry, support, and encourage one another's dreams and God's dreams for us. Who encourages and prayerfully supports you? Who reminds you of God's favor and that God is with you, even if you don't experience it to be true? Elizabeth praises Mary for not only being the mother of her Lord but for having the faith to believe God's word. What would it look like if we all encouraged one another in our faith and in our decisions? After all, we do not say yes to God's promises on our own. We are not alone. There is a chorus of bold, faithful women and men saying yes to God's promises alongside us, just as Mary and Elizabeth did. Or maybe you just can't quite get from how can this be to nothing is impossible for God just yet... so maybe you allow Mary and Elizabeth to give witness to the kind of faith perhaps that you cannot summon right now?! That's what a community of faith does for us as well. Holds space for our pondering and questions. Again, helping us to remember that we are not alone. God is with us.

While we continue to wait this Advent season and reflect on a tumultuous year, may we receive the words of Gabriel to Mary as our own- we, too, are favored by God, and God is with us. May we say yes- Here I am- even if we don't fully understand what's going on but still choose to believe that God is at work in all of it. May we not just talk about God's love but commit to embodying it. I invite you to dream and to believe, as Mary and Elizabeth did, that God uses ordinary people to make God's dreams for the world come true. Friends, may this Advent story be a reminder that- "whatever fear or loss or anxiety or uncertainty, whatever joy or anticipation or eager love lies ahead- love came down at

Christmas to be with us and to keep us, and all creation, always and forever”
(*Preaching God’s Transformative Justice*). Amen.