

Luke 1:26-38

Advent 4B + December 24, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
With You

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 45:8: "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our last antiphon of the Advent season is one more prayer, and a vivid one at that – especially if you're a desert dweller. The Lord provides showers of rain, of course; and where there is water, there is life. When showers of rain fall and the earth receives it, it's then that deserts flower and crops grow. Here in Isaiah 45, the clouds rain down righteousness: the earth opens to receive it, and salvation and righteousness spring up. It's not just a drop or a drizzle before the dry returns: it's a rain that gives life and quenches the deepest of thirsts.

A world this grimy and soiled with sin could use a good shower of righteousness. Of course, if you're going to have a good shower from above, you need to have a good cloud. And blessed are you, because there's a cloud – an actual cloud – in our gospel lesson that will do just the trick.

We should hasten to our gospel lesson, for I have a feeling that this last week of Advent is going to go by quickly. By now, the delightful surprise of Gabriel's appearance to Mary should be no surprise at all. The same Jesus, who is born in a manger and blends in with a crowd of ordinary sinners at the Jordan, is going to have just as humble-looking a conception. Gabriel doesn't appear to some princess in a palace in Jerusalem; no, instead he's sent to a city of Galilee named Nazareth; and if you like the sort of town with no tourist attractions and the strong smell of dead fish, Nazareth just might be your kind of place. Gabriel appears to Mary, and we don't know much about her. We know that she's a virgin, so important for prophecy to be fulfilled. We don't hear anything about her family, which leads many to speculate that she's orphaned. She's betrothed to a man named Joseph, so most people guess that she's probably around 15 years old or so. We also know that she, along with Joseph, is a descendant of King David – another prophecy fulfilled. That's about all we know about Mary.

It's to this young woman in backwoods Nazareth that the angel Gabriel appears and says, "Greetings (literally, *rejoice*), O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Mary is greatly troubled by this saying, which is sort of puzzling. Usually when an angel appears to people in the Bible, they're greatly troubled by what they *see*. Not Mary: she's bothered by what she *hears*. But what is so troubling about the angel's words?

Is it "Greetings!" – "Rejoice!"? How would it be troubling that an angel brings joyful greetings? If Gabriel started out, "Woe to you!", that would be one thing. But he says, "Rejoice!"

Is it, "O favored one"? How would it be troubling to hear that you are favored by God?

That leaves one last bit of Gabriel's words to consider: "The Lord is with you!"

For my money, that's your best bet for what troubles Mary. We already know that God favors her, that He's blessed her with faith in His promises. She would know the Old Testament, and she knows how God goes about His work; and God goes about His work for His people primarily in Jerusalem. That's the holy city, after all, a place that probably smells less like dead fish. That's where the temple is, where

sacrifices are made. That's where God dwells with His people: why, back when Solomon completed the first temple and it was dedicated, the Lord appeared in a cloud of glory above the temple, then descended into the Most Holy Place.

A lot has happened since then: the temple has been destroyed and reconstructed more than once. But if you ask folks, "Where is the Lord *with* His people?", the answer is "Jerusalem." It's certainly not "Nazareth." Yet here is Gabriel, in Nazareth, saying to Mary, "The Lord is with you."

How can the Lord be with Mary, present like at the temple, but in Nazareth? Gabriel tells her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of his father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

So that's it. When Gabriel said, "The Lord is with you," he wasn't kidding. Mary is going to give birth to the Son of the Most High. For the next nine months, the Lord is going to be inseparable from Mary, *with her* in her womb.

"How will this be, since I am a virgin?" A sensible question from a sensible girl. The angel answers, "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 called holy – the Son of God."

We were looking for a cloud, and there it is. The Most High will overshadow Mary, which is what clouds do – just as He will overshadow Peter, James and John in a cloud at the Transfiguration. The same God who led Israel out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud, who descended upon Mt. Sinai in a cloud, who overshadowed and entered the Most Holy Place of both the tabernacle and the temple in a cloud – the same God is going to overshadow Mary. And by the work of the Holy Spirit, she will conceive and give birth to the Son of God.

And through Mary's Son, the Lord will rain down righteousness on all nations. Salvation and righteousness will bear fruit. God will raise up a harvest of His people, just as He showered Stephanie this morning with water and the Word, with righteousness and salvation, and added her to the number of His people.

But back to Mary, whom Gabriel calls the "favored one." We Lutherans don't talk much about Mary, probably because we're afraid it's a Roman Catholic sort of thing to do, which seems terribly un-Lutheran. It's a shame when we think that way: if we have no problem talking about, say, Martin Luther, we should certainly have no problem talking about the mother of our Lord. Both of them are people whom God used at a certain time in order to advance His plan of salvation, and I daresay that Mary's part is as important as Luther's! The trick with Mary, or Luther, or anybody else is to speak the truth, acknowledge the good and the bad, and strip away any sort of legendary baggage that's gotten added on.

In the case of Mary, we aren't going to say that she was immaculately conceived, because the Bible doesn't say so; and we're certainly not going to give her titles like "mediatrix" or "co-redemptrix." Mary would have us look to her Son as our mediator and redeemer. But we ought to hear and say what the Bible says. Gabriel calls her the favored one, and that is a title Scripture gives to nobody else; but it is not because Mary has some special power within her, but because she is the one who is chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Because of what God does through her, says the Bible, all generations will call her blessed; and here we are today, fulfilling that Word.

Anyone who is favored by God is unlikely to have an easy time in a sinful world, and so it is for Mary. By faith, she believes the angel's word; and she gives the most astonishing confession of faith:

"Behold, I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." It is a rough equivalent to a similar prayer by her Son, years later, in a garden: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but yours, be done."

For Mary's faith and obedience in becoming the mother of Jesus, her first reward is that Joseph seeks to divorce her. He doesn't believe her story: but to be fair, if some teenage girl told you that she was a virgin who happened to be pregnant with God, would you believe her? In the case of Joseph, it takes a visit from an angel for him to keep Mary as his betrothed: then and now, the virgin birth can only be believed by faith, not proven by reason.

But for those nine months, Mary is a young expectant mother who ought not be – for while she is betrothed, she is not yet married. In the area where she lives, she probably faces shame and scorn at best, threats of execution at worst. But she believes the word that the angel has spoken, and she has said, "let it be to me according to your word."

She will give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem – joy to the world! But forty days later at the temple, Simeon tells Mary that there will much trouble on account of the Child, and that a sword will pierce her own heart also.

We don't hear much of Mary for most of the gospels, but we find her at the foot of the cross. Three decades before, she said, "Let it be to me according to your word," and that word has taken her to Calvary to see her son put to death most barbarically.

She is not immune to grief or temptation or doubt, or any other aspect of humanity. But she is remembered as the mother of Jesus who prayed, "Let it be to me according to your word." For that, some early Christians saw her as the second Eve: where Eve – the mother of all the living – ignored God's Word and ate the wrong fruit, Mary – the mother of God – held fast to the Word as part of God's plan for our salvation. Others see her as a type of the Church, as John does in Revelation: as Jesus was born of Mary by the work of the Holy Spirit, so the children of God are born in the Church by the Spirit's work in the means of grace.

Me, I get stuck her confession of faith: "I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," despite the trouble that is to follow. That should be the confession of every Christian, of you and me, right?

After all, it's not that Mary has a different kind of faith than the faith God gives to you: it is all faith in Christ, and as the Lord gave her faith to cling to Him no matter the callings and trials she faced, so the Lord gives you faith to cling to Him no matter the callings and trials that He appoints for you.

This is where we get a little funny as Lutherans: for as much as we want to insist that there's nothing special about Mary, we're still tempted to believe that she had a special kind of faith reserved only for biblical superheroes. Our sinful nature likes this idea, because it gives us an out when we're faced with a difficult test – it allows us to say things like, "Well sure, *Mary* could do this, but I'm just your average sort of believer."

The truth, however, is that, while God gives you different things to do than He gave to Mary, He gives you the same faith; and faith always prays, "I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to His Word." The truth is that, while you will encounter different trials and temptations than Mary, God promises the same strength and trust for you, so that you might faithfully endure and not fall into sin. That's why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." That's what you acknowledge every time you pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Lead us not into temptation."

The prayer of any Christian is, "Let it be to me according to God's Word." That happily means His promises of grace and mercy, but it also means strength and patience in suffering. It may mean endurance in a tough marriage or lifelong commitment to a child with disabilities. It may mean a less-than-enjoyable job situation that still provides daily bread. Often before you know it, you're making mental deals in your head along the lines of, "I'll trust in God as long as this or that doesn't happen;" and then, after you've tried to override God's covenant with your own stipulations, the bad happens and your faith is threatened because you're tempted to believe that God has let you down by not agreeing to your demands.

It simply isn't easy being a Christian – although it is no picnic to be a non-Christian, either. Daily, I plead with you, give thanks to God for His grace, for all of His good gifts. Remember His mercy for you despite your sin, and cling to the Savior who has died for you. Acknowledge that, even when the day goes bad or your entire life becomes a dumpster fire, the Lord is still faithful and working for your good. Where you're tempted to doubt or to believe that God hasn't given you enough faith, repent of accusing God of being so miserly, since He is the one who showers you with righteousness. Where you find you've adopted pet sins because you think God hasn't given enough faith to resist them, repent before you harden your heart and destroy yourself.

The Lord is faithful. He faithfully sustained Mary through all sorts of trial. He will faithfully sustain you. It can be no other way, because the Lord was with Mary in Nazareth to be your Savior. He was born, grew up, lived, died and rose again for your salvation. Even now in the liturgy, the pastor speaks the same greeting as Gabriel to you: "The Lord be with you!" It is still an announcement of great joy, because the Lord is just as present as He was in Mary's womb; now, He is present in His Word and sacraments for your salvation.

Present, He gives and strengthens faith. Present, He showers you with righteousness and salvation, that you may be the fruit borne of His sacrifice. Present, He strengthens you to pray, "Oh, Lord, I am a Your servant; let it be to me according to Your Word."

And present, He declares to you, His repentant people, "Let this be to you: according to My Word, you are forgiven for all of your sins."

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