

*Texts: Luke 1:26-45*

*Subject: The Birth of Jesus Foretold*

*Theme: Let it Be Love*

*Second Sunday of Advent; Dec. 20, 2020; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our coming savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

It's been a rough year no doubt. Things are tough if you've got a pre-existing medical condition, if your housing was not exactly solid in February and March, it's less so now. If your work was in a hotel, or centered around conventions and hospitality, or live music, it might be gone altogether. Teachers and school staff have been through more than we can imagine this year, and still wait to find out what the next semester will look like in many places. And pastors? Yes, we've struggled, too. It's been a long hard year. But I have to wonder if we've been awakened to something. So many people are wondering what will be, waiting for something, looking toward the future, many expecting it to get worse before it gets better. I've heard a lot of talk over the last nine months about the end times, the trials and tribulations of the world, and the Biblical end of days. Yet, others are watching and longing for a new way, a new beginning, a fulfillment of the promises of the past, a beautiful new reality - not just in a political sense, but the newness of a more spiritual, more loving existence.

The last few weeks have been for many filled with great anticipation. We are preparing for the Christmas season, giving with joy to organizations and agencies that help those in need in our community, adorning houses with decorations, making plans, even if they're different from years past. We have had news of vaccines, and now it has begun to roll out - a sign that the pandemic we have faced for so long may finally end. The suffering that it has brought will continue - the ripple effects of this catastrophe have

reached almost every sector of our world. I cannot begin to believe that we will not be changed by the events of 2020. What will God do next?

Prophets were the ones who carried the word of the Lord to the people.

In this season of advent we've heard the promises of God poured out through the mouths of the prophets. They told of destruction to come, but also of **hope** for the future. They condemned the selfishness of the world around them, called the people to return to God, to prepare their hearts for something new, and envisioned the **peace** of the Lord in their midst. They spoke of the pain of the poor and marginalized, the ones that had fallen through the cracks, and still promised on the horizon deliverance, and **joy** for Israel and all God's people. They called out the powerful who had led the people astray, and named injustice, and made straight the pathway for **love** to enter into the world.

Something is coming. Yes, new leadership in our nation, but also new opportunities to work, and build and recover; relief for those nurses, doctors, and hospital workers - some who have worked over 270 days without a day off; alternate ways of being the church, and perhaps for some, a realignment of our hearts with the God of the universe. Oh yes, hockey season too - I didn't forget that. The world is still turning. Babies are still being born. God is still moving. Christmas is coming.

Today we round out the season of hopeful expectation, of preparing, and waiting with the announcement of new birth. In our worship we're moving from the Hebrew Bible into the New Testament, and from now until Easter Sunday, we'll be reading from Luke's orderly account of the good news of Jesus.

Allow me to set it up a little bit here. This story begins within a historic timeframe, noting the leaders of the time. The promise of a coming king means that the old king has to go. Luke gives Joseph's name even before Mary's here, as one who comes from the line of David. If you didn't know Herod, or Quirinius, or had never heard of the town of Nazareth, you at least knew which David this referred to. The promise of a king from the line or house, or dynasty of David would have been heard loud and clear to the first ones who heard this - we're hearing about the messiah - the Savior.

"Greetings favored one," the angel Gabriel says to Mary. If you've heard this story many times, or read it in Children's Bibles, it might be hard to understand how shocking this must have been. Imagine a limo pulling up to the park down the street. I know many of the guys who hang out there during the day. Some of them come to eat at our senior meal program. These guys are not what you'd consider "favored." They sleep outdoors, and have seen things in their lives that we'd rather not repeat. So let's really understand this: Imagine Bill Murray gets out of a limo at the park down the street and says to one of these gentlemen something like, "Greetings, my friend! Today is your lucky day!"

But it's more than that, since the angel seems to offer some strange news. The idea that she would conceive a son might put Mary's existence in danger. She was engaged but not married. She is a virgin, a young woman, and she has not been in a relationship in a way that she might find herself pregnant. She wonders about the angel's greeting, since she doesn't feel favored. She is initially confused by the promise of a child, which might be dangerous for her. And is then seemingly convinced when the angel pronounces this to be the work of the Spirit, and hears the announcement that her

relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son in her old age. *God does things that are impossible.*

Mary's response begins with a question, "How can this be?" And moves to acceptance: "Let it be with me according to your word." She believes. But she doesn't just begrudgingly accept this as fate, she *claims it*. "I am the servant of the Lord." She announces her identity. Wow. That's who she is. From that position of power, Mary assents to the promise, not in a passive way, but with boldness - she *knows* that God will do this. As amazing as it might be, she trusts in that Word that she receives from the divine messenger. She is so much more than we or her society expects her to be. She is more than a vessel. With all that she is, Mary accepts this new role and reality, to be 'God-bearer', *theotokos* - and all that it would mean for the world. She believes it.

God brings the action. God is doing the thing. God takes the initiative.

Bible scholar N.T. Wright says "When God takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love, love which will care for us and take us up into God's saving purposes." God shows up for the world, God shows up for love. God shows up for Mary. So she goes to visit Elizabeth. Upon hearing her greeting the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy," Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. God was with her, too - taking initiative, doing something unexpected. She would be the mother of John, who would prepare the way for Jesus. This visit was confirmation of the promise to Mary, and she sings of what God has done through her.

Whatever Mary's life was before, whatever she had gone through, we can't really know for sure. The visit from the angel, the promise of a savior, the new life in her womb, means that everything had changed. How can we see our own lives in the light

of the promised birth of Jesus? So many of us are still waiting for good news, waiting for deliverance, waiting for something to happen that will fix what is broken in us and around us. Can we not see that we have also been given God's Spirit? This power of love that creates life, that opens new pathways, that enables us to live centered in the hope and peace and joy of Christ is with us all the time. It's already here. Just ask Mary. She believes it. The angel promises new life, and Mary sings.

The Mighty One has done great things.

God has looked with favor on the lowly.

God has shown mercy for those who fear Him and strength over the proud.

The announcement of what Jesus' life will mean is sung by Mary with passion and emphasis, in a tense we might call - *the prophetic past* - it is a proclamation so sure that it is spoken as if it has already happened.

The mighty are cast down, the hungry are filled, the rich are sent away empty.

It's hard for us to see, as corporations grow their profits while workers lose their jobs.

Neighbors are evicted while new hotels and stadiums are erected. Our parents and grandparents barely survive on social security and immigrants are sent away unwelcome. *But Mary sings something new.*

This prophetic truth, being spoken in the face of Mary's own stark personal reality, sings of what God has always and already done for us and pronounces what God will do for the world. Mary's response - we call it *the magnificat* - tells us that love is coming. Jesus came and is coming to walk and live and exist in our time and history, to bring healing and salvation and be that embodiment of love in the world.

*I need to know:* Can we be awakened to that kind of love in our time? Can we find faith to believe the promise and let it be in us? Martin Luther taught us in the Lord's prayer, that as we pray, "Thy kingdom come" we can know that the kingdom *will* come with or without our prayer. God's Word does that which it promises. We pray that it may come also to us. And it comes through the Holy Spirit, which gives us faith to believe the Word. That same spirit that came to Elizabeth and Mary, it lives in us, through our baptism, we receive new life and faith, and forgiveness right there through the water and the word. It is the spirit of love that binds us to God, and to our neighbors, that gets worked out in acts of service, large and small in the many ways we live in the world.

Let it be love in your life. Let it be with you according to God's word. Let it be with me. May God's Spirit dwell in all of us richly this Christmas. Amen.