

# SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS SUNDAY 12-21-14

The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i  
United Church of Christ

Scripture: Luke 1:26-55

Message: **"Advent 4: God's Timing, God's Plans,  
God's Work!"**

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## GATHERING IN THE WORD OF GOD

On today's 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent—our eyes turn to the call of Mary of Nazareth and her calling to us! Her response to God and her hymn of praise ring out through the ages and serve as a model for our own spiritual journeys.

## HEARING THE WORD OF GOD

### Luke 1:26-55 (The VOICE Bible)

<sup>26</sup> Six months later in Nazareth, a city in *the rural province of Galilee*, the heavenly messenger Gabriel made another appearance. This time the messenger was sent by God <sup>27</sup> to meet with a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David himself. <sup>28</sup> The messenger entered her home.

**Messenger:** Greetings! You are favored, and the Lord is with you! [Among all women on the earth, you have been blessed.]

<sup>29</sup> The heavenly messenger's words baffled Mary, and she wondered what type of greeting this was.

**Messenger:** <sup>30</sup> Mary, don't be afraid. You have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> Listen, you are going to become pregnant. You will have a son, and you must name Him "Savior," or Jesus. <sup>32</sup> Jesus will become the greatest among men. He will be known as the Son of the Highest God. God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David, <sup>33</sup> and He will reign over the covenant family of Jacob forever.

**Mary:** <sup>34</sup> But I have never been with a man. How can this be possible?

**Messenger:** <sup>35</sup> The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The Most High will overshadow you. That's why this holy child will be known, *as not just your son, but also* as the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> *It sounds impossible*, but listen—you know your relative Elizabeth has been unable to bear children and is now far too old to be a mother. Yet she has become pregnant, *as God willed it*. Yes, in three months, she will have a son. <sup>37</sup> So the impossible is possible with God.

**Mary (deciding in her heart):** <sup>38</sup> Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me.

*Luke is very interested in the ways that disadvantaged people of his day respond to God. Already there is a fascinating interplay between Zacharias's response to God and Mary's.*

And the heavenly messenger was gone. <sup>39</sup> Mary immediately got up and hurried to the hill country, in the province of Judah, <sup>40-41</sup> where her cousins Zacharias and Elizabeth lived. When Mary entered their home and greeted Elizabeth, who felt her baby leap in her womb, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

**Elizabeth** (*shouting*): <sup>42</sup> You are blessed, *Mary*, blessed among all women, and the child you bear is blessed! <sup>43</sup> And blessed I am as well, that the mother of my Lord has come to me! <sup>44</sup> As soon as I heard your voice greet me, my baby leaped for joy within me. <sup>45</sup> How fortunate you are, *Mary*, for you believed that what the Lord told you would be fulfilled.

*Mary is deeply moved by these amazing encounters—first with the messenger and then with her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary's response can't be contained in normal prose; her noble soul overflows in poetry. And this poetry isn't simply religious; it has powerful social and political overtones. It speaks of a great reversal—what might be called a social, economic, and political revolution. To people in Mary's day, there is little question as to what she is talking about. The Jewish people are oppressed by the Roman Empire, and to speak of a King who will demote the powerful and rich and elevate the poor and humble means one thing: God is moving toward setting them free! Soon Zacharias will overflow in poetry of his own.*

<sup>46</sup> **Mary:** My soul lifts up the Lord!

<sup>47</sup> My spirit celebrates God, my Liberator!

<sup>48</sup> For though I'm God's humble servant,  
God has noticed me.

Now and forever,

I will be considered blessed by all generations.

<sup>49</sup> For the Mighty One has done great things for me;  
holy is God's name!

<sup>50</sup> From generation to generation,  
God's lovingkindness endures  
for those who revere Him.

- 51 God's arm has accomplished mighty deeds.  
The proud in mind and heart,  
God has sent away in disarray.
- 52 The rulers from their high positions of power,  
God has brought down low.  
And those who were humble and lowly,  
God has elevated with dignity.
- 53 The hungry—God has filled with fine food.  
The rich—God has dismissed with nothing in their hands.
- 54 To Israel, God's servant,  
God has given help,
- 55 As promised to our ancestors,  
remembering Abraham and his descendants in mercy forever.

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Unlike all the other women in the Bible for whom the announcement of a child is such incredible news—for Mary—she has not been pining and longing for years for a baby. She's not even *ready* to have a baby. She's very young (perhaps no more the twelve or thirteen years of age!) having gained the physical ability to become pregnant in probably in just the last year or so. Further—Mary is not married yet; although for most girls of her time, her marriage had been prearranged by her parents long ago—so there was no question that Mary would get married one day. But it hadn't happened yet!

So the Angel Gabriel's announcement of her impending-just-around-the-corner pregnancy was **not** the answer to Mary's prayers. Far from it! In fact, the Angel Gabriel's words do not solve a problem for Mary—as Gabriel's words **create** a problem. This simply was not the time for Mary to have a baby!

**But this is at least partly the point of this story: it's not about Mary's time or plans but is simply and solely God's timing, God's plans, and God's work! God is intervening and getting involved in this world, upsetting schedules and realigning lives because that's what it takes to get God's premiere work of redemption accomplished and done!**

### **Can I get an AMEN?**

So the Angel Gabriel visits Mary, a virgin—and has never had a child before. Mary is not like Sarah who was in her 80's or even her cousin Elizabeth who also appears to have been close to retirement age: Mary just entered puberty! Mary then quite logically asks the Angel Gabriel, "*How will this be since I am still a virgin?*" But an equally good question to ask is, "Why me?" since Mary doesn't seem like a logical candidate for divine intervention on the fertility front!

As we understand this story—we get the sense that something very new, very striking, and quite possibly very wonderful is about to happen!

And it is!

### **So what does Christmas mean?**

- Christmas opens the door to bring people together who have not seen each other in a long time.
- Christmas opens the door to bring folks together who have been estranged and not speaking to each other—to begin speaking again.
- Christmas is a time to focus on the other people around us.

- For some Christmas means being nicer than usual or better than you've been; maybe patching up a broken relationship, digging a little deeper into our pocket to *chip in* and donate to a charity or two, and just generally getting along with everyone as to not spoil anyone's holiday cheer.
- Or—we're not looking to change the world – we'll settle for getting along with reasonable happiness and tranquility until January 2 gets here and we can then get back to *normal* again!

In other words, we'll make Christmas about **us**, about solving **our** problems, about finding ways to handle this or that difficulty in **our** family's dynamics.

**Sisters and brothers in Christ—Christmas isn't about our agenda and our things.** As with Mary, so with us: **God brings us what God knows we need *whether* we thought we needed it or not. God intervenes in our lives to remind us that what Advent is about is the defeat of sin, evil, and death.** The advent and arrival of God's Christ into our world—as the Angel Gabriel's speech to Mary made so abundantly clear—is ultimately about so much more than the everyday things we bring to our tables each December!

**Interestingly—nowhere in the Bible does Jesus ask us to celebrate his birthday. But—everywhere Jesus and the apostles command us to celebrate Jesus' death—to eat this bread and drink that cup . . . until Jesus comes.**

## **DOING THE WORD OF GOD**

So what is the Word of God for us on this Christmas Sunday?

## **1.ONE: LET EACH OF US BE JESUS' GRACE TO EVERYONE THIS CHRISTMAS WHO GOD BRINGS ACROSS OUR PATH!**

The word for GRACE in the New Testament is **charis**. *Charis* can also mean "Rejoice!" Also the word for "highly favored" is likewise a cognate of this same word-stem, **charitoo** which means *endow with favor as well as to have grace and favor bestowed on you*.

Being the target for GRACE is always a cause to rejoice! For it will be Mary's son who will bring grace and truth to the entire world—opening up a gracious way of salvation through his own sacrificial death!

So today and in the days ahead—be God's grace to someone—look for that person who God is sending your way—and be God's grace to them!

## **2.TWO: JESUS IS GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION!**

We all though this and we have experienced it in our lives. Yet it takes teaching, study, fellowship with other sisters and brothers, experiences—and being a part of the Body of Christ! This is what Christmas is about and why we celebrate Christmas!

So what are we doing about it this Christmas and in the New Year 2015?

## **3.THREE: WE ARE CALLED TO BELIEVE THAT GOD NOTICES, FAVORS, AND BLESSES US! AND ONCE WE BELIEVE THAT—WE CAN DO INCREDIBLE THINGS!**

Maybe there won't conceive or bear a Son of God, but so what—that's been done already anyway! But think how many other wonderful things here that God wants to accomplish, complete, realize and get done through us—Chinese-speaking and English-speaking!

At last Sunday's Board meeting our new 2015 Church officers and co-chairs of our committees and ministries were chosen and named. There's ministries all over our Church that you have opportunities to serve our Lord Jesus. **All we have to say is YES LORD, I WILL SERVE!**

### **SENDING IN THE WORD OF GOD**

Blessing is a powerful thing as well as a rare thing. We live in a world that seems geared to rewards and punishments. But blessings intrudes, interrupts, and ultimately disrupts our *quid pro quo* world which is a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something.

Blessing is unmerited and undeserved regard and favor. As blessings by God sinks in—even Mary was able to open herself to the work of God to bless the whole world through her willingness to carry Jesus to birth. Mary is an example for us that when we believe that God notices, favors and blesses you—you may just change the people, our church, and the world!

All of us are highly regarded by God, that all of us, actually, are God's favored ones called and commissioned to hear, believe and respond to God's blessing wherever we are!

So where will you go this week, what will you do, whom will you meet or try to find, and how in each of these

circumstances **know** that God is noticing you and blessing you to that you may be a blessing to someone else or even to the whole world!

**THANKS BE TO GOD! MELE KALIKIMAKA!**