



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Rejoice, Highly Favored One!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ DECEMBER 24, 2023

During this month of Advent, I have had several opportunities to share the Word of God with members of our church. At the beginning of the month, I gave a message on things from John the Baptist's point of view. Then with our Men's Ministry, I shared Scripture passages about Joseph. We are now going to bring Mary, the mother of Jesus into the picture. Our passage today is about the Annunciation which was when the angel Gabriel told Mary what was going to happen. If sometime in the future we can again travel to Israel and you tour with me, I will take you to the very place where the events of this passage took place.

I will begin with the 26th verse of Luke chapter 1.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name *was* Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored *one*, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!"

²⁹ But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest;

and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

³⁵And the angel answered and said to her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* ³⁶Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷For with God nothing will be impossible."

³⁸Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38 (NKJV)

That is impossible! No way! How many times have those assertions been applied to events attested to in the Bible? Many accounts recorded in the Old Testament the Miracles of Jesus, the Resurrection, the Atonement, Pentecost, the Nativity Star, and even Creation itself, not to mention doubts concerning the writing of the Bible itself have been declared impossible. This is expressed by those whose conception of God is way too small! The result of having a conception of God that is so small, how many times is the phrase "that's impossible" applied to that which God calls us to be and to do and to face? It is even exclaimed by some believers when facing life's many challenges, sorrows, and trials.

In chapter 19 of the Gospel of Matthew during a conversation with His disciples, Jesus set the bar very high for entering

the Kingdom of Heaven. The disciples asked Him, “Who then can be saved?” (verse 25), and Jesus’ classic response in verse 26 was, “*With man this is impossible, but **with God all things are possible.***” All things are possible— but this, of course, must be understood in the context of the way Jesus taught us to pray saying “Thy will be done.” Is what we are considering consistent with God’s will regarding the matter?

For instance, when I was a child, I had the delusion that someday I could play shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals. Needless to say, that was not God’s plan for my life, nor did He bless me with the ability or the opportunity to do so. So, *all things are possible*, but not all things are *permitted*, which explains the nonfulfillment of other ambitions of mine. But God’s will and His ability to make things happen are revealed over and over again in His Word.

In our personal lives doubt can still exist. For instance, we are called to embrace forgiveness as a part of being a disciple of Jesus and yet how often do we stubbornly hold on to the burden of unforgiveness insisting, “I will *never* be able to forgive that person,” meaning that “I’m not *willing* to ever forgive that person.” Meanwhile, God is ready to heal and renew our hearts and calls us through that act of forgiveness to be a living testimony of the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit in this very, very broken world.

Consider this—in Romans, Paul writes that we are to present our bodies “*as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God*” (Romans 12:1). And in 1 Corinthians 6:19 we see that our “*body is a temple of the Holy Spirit **who is in you**, whom you have from God, and you are not your own.*” And yet, as we are called to live a life of holiness and purity for His glory, we resign ourselves to live with habits, addictions, attitudes, and behaviors

that are contrary to His will by saying, “Well, that's just the way I am,” rather than by proclaiming the truth that we are *new creations* in Christ. Is it impossible for me to change? With man it is impossible but with God *nothing* is impossible.

We also are called to repentance and to live a redeemed life yet we are enslaved by regrets, holding on to past sins, burdened by guilt, and saying, “I can never forgive myself.” This really means, “I don't really *believe* in the effectiveness of the Cross.” We can be overwhelmed by grief, which is an honest emotion, and those of us who have experienced grief know how extremely difficult the experience can be and how long it takes to heal. But we again can get stuck by repeating to ourselves, “I'll never get over this” all the while denying His power to heal the most devastated heart. The “*peace of God, which surpasses all understanding*” (Phil 4:7) ensures that someday your joy will return. Finally, God can call us to new tasks and new ways to serve Him. While we have countless examples of how God equips those whom He calls, we fail to see and seize opportunities to serve because we are convinced that we are not capable, or we are unworthy with no chance for success.

This morning I invite you to consider **this** impossible situation. It may seem impossible for human beings but it's right in line with God's will and purpose achieved by His power and sovereign grace. What this story about Mary reveals to us is the truth of the “Kingdom view” of God's calling in our lives to be His people. Let's see if we can understand what the “Kingdom view” of our life's path is like. In verses 26 and 27 we read,

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Some people stop right at “the angel Gabriel was sent by God” because they don’t believe in angels. Well, Jesus spoke as if angels exist and He ought to know, so that’s all that needs to be said.

The text says that “*a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph.*” We need to understand what is meant by the word “betrothed” because it doesn’t mean the same thing as getting “engaged” in our culture. In our culture, when two people want to get married, the guy “pops” the question, pulls out the ring, and asks the girl who accepts his proposal. Sometimes they decide to keep it a secret for a while. Perhaps a few months go by, and they decide that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea, so they break off the engagement and no one’s the wiser. That’s not what betrothal was back in those days. A betrothal meant they were *legally married* but were not yet living together as husband and wife while they waited for the big wedding celebration. Remember the wedding in Cana where Jesus, His disciples, and the whole town showed up and they ran out of wine? It was after that big celebration that the couple lived together as husband and wife.

When a couple is betrothed, the families have already come to an agreement and the couple is as good as married. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and since they have not lived together as husband and wife, it is assumed that she was a virgin—and so she was. But this situation will cause a crisis for Joseph, which we’ll talk about in just a moment.

Listen to how the angel Gabriel told Mary to receive the news in verse 28: “*And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored **one**, the Lord **is** with you; blessed **are** you among women!”* Gabriel doesn’t seem bothered by the situation at all. In fact, he starts by telling Mary to

“Rejoice!” The dictionary says that “to rejoice is a spontaneous emotional reaction of extreme happiness.” That is the way she was supposed to respond to this. Why rejoice? Because she is “*highly favored*.” Think about it. Out of all the women in human history God chose Mary for this incredible miracle. To be put in this situation, according to Gabriel, is a matter of being *favored* and a cause to *rejoice*. Not only highly favored—that is, given great privilege—but blessed because of it. This blessing is not simply about receiving something very edifying for Mary, which it proved to be, but it carried with it one of the most tremendous responsibilities in human history. What a blessing to be called to be the mother of Jesus! To be a mother with all that it includes, to be a mother to the One whom we are called to love more than anyone, to be the mother to whom those precious infant eyes looked for nurture, for protection, for comfort, and for love.

Now let’s look at verses 29 and 30:

But when she saw **him**, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

Even before she received the message, she wasn't quite sure what to think. How often were people in Scripture visited by angels? Usually, something tremendous followed, including trouble. What does he mean by being favored and being blessed in this greeting?

Friends, when God calls us to something or entrusts us with something, whether it is a great gift or a great trial, He means for us to receive it for His purpose. Do we assume that we are favored or that we are blessed? Do we embrace that situation, that life path, that challenge, trusting in His purpose? Even if it

is a great gift, do we embrace it only for ourselves or can we see a larger purpose that involves interactions with others? This is what I mean by a Kingdom view. Otherwise, we might think that everything is about us. Oftentimes what God calls us to is not only about us. There may be other people whom God needs to cross our paths. He may use us to impact others. There may be opportunities for our growth, but there may also be opportunities for others to grow through our experiences.

For instance, have you ever thought when you go to the hospital to be ministered to, that your interaction with others may serve a larger purpose? Even in that situation, God can use us to bless those very people who are trying to minister to us. This is the Kingdom view of embracing the experiences to which we are called. In Mary's case, it was not all about her—it was about salvation for us all. God's call to Mary was for the eternal benefit of everyone sitting in this room.

Gabriel greeted her by declaring to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” There it is again, repeated over and over in Scripture, “Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not fear.” You see, God has a different definition of what it means “to be favored” and “to be blessed” than we do. When our call is according to His purpose and His plan as opposed to our own, we need not fear. Perhaps Mary did not know with absolute certainty what life with Joseph would be like, but I suspect that based on the culture of the day she had a reasonable idea. We anticipate what our life will be like. We have plans mixed with the ingredients of our hopes, dreams, and desires but there are times when God intrudes. He intervenes in our planned life and reveals that He has something else in mind. Like Mary, we might be troubled. We might not be sure why God is doing something, so we may be afraid and perhaps resistant or even angry or grieving because of the path we must

tread. Life doesn't go as we had planned or as we had envisioned. Who knows what larger purpose God has in store? Participating in what He is doing is to be favored and blessed. Out of all the people of the world, God chose you for your path.

What is God's message for Mary through Gabriel in verses 31 to 33?

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus [*which means the Lord saves*]. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give 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.

In other words, Gabriel told her she would give birth to the Messiah!

However, Mary has an understandable question that could stop this wonderful plan dead in its tracks. Verse 34 continues: *"Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?'"* Like so many before her who had been given a special calling by God, she wondered how it was possible, but as with those who went before her, God answered in verse 35.

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

The most amazing miracle to date—a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

Why is the Virgin Birth so important? You will notice that Jesus is not going to be conceived by a human source. Otherwise, from the start Jesus would carry the stain of fallen, sinful

human nature in need of repentance and salvation for Himself. Someone would have needed to die for Him. To be the Savior, He must be without sin: “the Lamb without blemish” needed for the ultimate sacrifice at Passover. He is the One who atones for all the sins of humanity so He could not come from a human source. But He also was born of a woman which means He is also human. Impossible! This is the miracle of the Incarnation which the theologians have been wrestling since. But this is what was revealed in Jesus and testified to in Scripture—being fully God and fully human in the same person. This miracle is what we will celebrate tonight during our Christmas Eve worship service.

To hold off any further objections, Gabriel informed Mary that something extraordinary had already happened. Her cousin Elizabeth, in her old age and barren her whole life, was herself going to have a child. She had conceived that child, who is to be John the Baptist, six months before. What's the explanation? “For with God nothing will be impossible” (verse 37) including salvation for somebody like me.

My friends, we finally come to the verse that puts an exclamation point on the whole announcement. This Annunciation! Here is a betrothed young woman, legally married but not yet living with her betrothed as husband and wife, who is to become pregnant. This is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Even though Joseph was assured by the angel in the Gospel of Matthew that Mary hadn't done anything wrong and he could still go through with the marriage, people were going to be able to do the math. Now let's see... we did the big celebration when?...and your baby was born when? This situation is more serious than simply snickers behind the napkins because such a discovery would be considered adultery, and according to Mosaic law, it would even allow for Mary to be stoned to

death. That is why Joseph thought he would put her away or divorce her quietly to spare her the public shame and the penalty.

Yet what was her response? She did not argue, she did not object, she did not run away, but she submitted to God's purpose for her life, "*Behold the maidservant [slave in Greek] of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word*" (verse 38). Because of that submission, she was part of bringing into the world, raising, and being a mother to the One we worship, and the only One through whom we are saved.

So, the accounts of John the Baptist and Joseph and Mary speak volumes about faithfulness, integrity, and commitment; about honoring and trusting God; about being instruments in His hands, and about His servants walking the path of life to which each of them was called. But notice their stories are not ultimately about them. Rather it's about their particular story within the greatest story ever told: the larger story of God's purpose; God's story of grace and redemption in the building of the Kingdom. They were all subservient, and a part of the road to Calvary and the empty tomb. We must always, always make a connection between Christmas and Easter.

Tonight we will reconvene to worship the One who came to save us, complete with the warmth of the candles, the decorations, the fellowship, and the joy of the season. However, as my dear mother always told us on Christmas morning, "We must never forget that He was born to die." The destiny and purpose of that little baby in the cradle was for God Himself to make a personal appearance in the world, intervene in human history, die for us on the Cross, and be raised again on the third day so that you and I might be able to have eternal life... which begins now! John the Baptist, Joseph, and Mary fulfilled

their roles in God's great plan of salvation.

I'll leave you with a few things upon which to meditate. Your own sphere of influence may not be as grand and glorious as that of John the Baptist, Joseph, or Mary, but where is God leading you in your life? What life path is God leading you to follow for His purpose as He draws you to the Savior and builds His kingdom? Remember, the symbol of the Nativity Star reminds us of how the Magi were led to Jesus to see for themselves the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Can the Nativity Star be a symbol for our own journey of discipleship, to see Jesus for ourselves in our own lives? Do we believe that *nothing* is impossible for God? Do we embrace faith as Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done"? In our own sphere of influence have we dedicated our lives to His purpose?

I pray, my brothers and sisters, that amid all the Christmas warmth, celebration, and good tidings, like Mary we submit to the call of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of our life's journey and be able to say and truly believe as Mary did, may it be to me according to Your Word. ■



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org