

Home Service for December 20, 2020

Welcome and Announcements

You might notice a few changes. You may also find listening to some of your favorite hymns helpful in worship, just like we are doing in the church building.

Call to Worship:

Light the lamps, prepare the room, God is coming to us! Make our hearts and spirits ready to receive God's most gracious gift, God's Son, Jesus Christ. Push the darkness away. The light is truly coming! May God's light shine on us, in us and through us that God's glory may be seen. AMEN.

Opening Prayer:

In the rush of preparation for holiday celebration, we come to this place to be fed by God. We need the peace, hope, love and joy that this season represents. We need to listen again with wonder at the magnificent words of Mary as she proclaims her faithful participation in God's most miraculous gift. Open our hearts this day, Lord, to receive the words and the blessings, to be fed and then to be those who will share with others as you have shared with us. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

Prayer of Confession:

Savior God, shine upon us with your grace. We long to align ourselves with the proud and the mighty. Guide us to walk with those who are poor and weak. When we yearn for riches and glory guide our hearts back to your thirst for justice and righteousness. Remember us with mercy. We desire to live as the household of faith you would have us be. Help us live according to your gospel and trust that all things are possible in your love. In Christ's saving grace, we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Rejoice! God has looked with favor upon the powerless and the lowly. Christ has come to redeem us from our sin. The Spirit has strengthened us with the power of grace and love. In the mercy of the triune God, we are forgiven.

Lighting the Advent Candles

Last Sunday we lit the candle of Hope, remembering the hope which comes in Christ, the candle of Peace, remembering God's dream of a peaceful world, and the candle of Joy, remembering the Spirit within us who brings joy. (Light Candles).

Today we light the fourth candle of Advent, the candle of Love.

Scripture tells us "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18). God created this world in love and this world will end in the love of God.

God's love pervades all aspects of this life. From birth to death, pain to delight, strangers to lovers, God's love is there.

We light this candle in Love. (Light Candle)

On this day, we remember God is Love.

Read Luke 1:47-55

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

Prayers of the People:

One week left, Lord, just one week left. Can we get all the things done that we have set before us? Have all the cards been mailed, the greetings extended, the gatherings coordinated and placed in our calendar for this last rush before the BIG DAY? Have we forgotten anything? Have we forgotten anyone? It would be easy to say, we have forgotten the reason for the season....that phrase which is imprinted on key chains and coffee mugs. We think that if we post the note that says "Jesus is the reason for the season", we will truly be fulfilling our Christmas commitment. How foolish we are! Placing the words on the wall, taped to a bulletin board, on a refrigerator, does not place the words in our hearts. We replace the glorious story of God's Incarnate word, with tinsel and wrapping paper and believe that we are ready to celebrate. When will we learn? Come to us now, comforting God, with your powerful words of healing. Help us to remember the witness of Mary, a young girl, who never expected to play such a role in salvation history. Put the brakes on our rushing and sit us down to hear the story of your absolute Love for us. Get us ready for the birth of your Son who will become our Savior. Move us from the focus of our festivities to a focus on witnessing about your love through serving others. Challenge us to reach out to people in need, not only with a check to support a particular endeavor, but with actual contact in ministries of sacrifice and service. In such times as this remind us that we are called to proclaim your love through witness and service. AMEN.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is The kingdom, and the power and the glory forever and ever. AMEN

Read the Lesson: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

³Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you."

⁴But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

⁵“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? ⁶I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. ⁷Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

⁸“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. ¹⁰And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹¹and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders^[a] over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:

Read the Epistle Lesson: Romans 16:25-27

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from^[a] faith— ²⁷to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Read the Gospel Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call

him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Message

Have you ever been on the receiving end of a surprise? Maybe a surprise birthday party? A Surprise visit from a special family member or friend? Or a phone call from someone from your past?

This morning I would like to look at one of the greatest surprises that ever happened. It took place when an angel by the name of Gabriel appeared to a young teenager by the name of Mary. Gabriel piled one surprise upon another. If God's surprises could be gift wrapped and put under a tree, Mary and Joseph's Christmas tree would have been packed.

What did and even now does an angel's visit mean to a believer? By reading the scriptures we find that angel visits were events filled with wonder. In the Old Testament, angels visited God's people many times. Usually a visit by an angel meant that a major event was about to happen. Fear and awe are part of angel visits, for the person being visited knew that the Almighty, the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth was involved in his or her life.

Mary was a believer. She had heard the stories of old. She knew of the visits of the angels to the Old Testament patriarchs. She knew of the times that the angels had visited Abraham and how his life had taken dramatic turns every time. Mary remembered Jacob wrestling with an angel. The vision of the angel placing a hot

coal on Isaiah's lips had probably been burned in her memories. Mary must've been thinking, "Why would an angel be visiting me?" What's going to happen to me? How is my life going to change? And then Gabriel speaks: "The Lord is with you, do not be afraid."

What we often do not realize is that Gabriel's visit to Mary is our angel visit, too. His announcement of grace and favor extends through time and space and comes to us here and now, if we are listening.

In this morning's gospel there is a word the angel used that I would like to draw your attention to. When he addressed Mary, he used this word twice. Listen he says, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." And again he, said, "Do not be afraid, Mary for you have found favor with God." Did you notice the word I am talking about. It is favor or favored one. Mary had found favor with God. Chosen to give birth to God's only begotten Son is no small thing. When we think about Mary and the baby we think about the animals arranged neatly in the stable, we picture warm glowing lights, we see a halo over the head of Mary and the Babe. When we think about Mary and her favored status, we think everything was easy, everything was neat, everything was good.

There is another word in verse 29 I want to bring to your attention, "But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be." Mary was troubled at the saying. She did not go out and seek the favored status with God, God came to her through an angel. Mary was surprised by the grace of God which found her.

I am amazed that in verse 38 Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." I wonder if my faith, if I believe strong enough to answer how she did? Mary consented to act as God's way of bringing grace to the whole world. Mary was graced by God. But it was a difficult life as one is graced by God.

Think about what the life of Mary who was called a favored one really was. Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. How could she ever explain that to anyone let alone to Joseph. In that day good Jewish girls just did not get pregnant outside of marriage and expect to be allowed in the community.

Besides having to endure all the gossip even after Joseph decide to stand by her after God spoke to him, imagine how awful it would have been to ride a burrow all those miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was a tough, wearisome journey for anyone. Bouncing around on the back of a burro could not possibility be easy to a

pregnant woman. When she got there, there was no hospital, no doctor, no comfortable surrounding waiting for her, she couldn't even find a place in the inn so she had to go off into a stable with the presence of cattle odor and beds of rough hay to lay on. There in the humblest of surrounding the king was born. Would you call that favored?

Remember the story continues, Joseph and Mary with the new born king had to escape Herod's massacre of the children, then finally they were able to return to Nazareth to the hard work of a carpenter's life.

She watched her oldest son grow, she became proud of him. Humble people loved him. But as he began his public ministry the powerful ones regarded him with increasing hatred. People were beginning to line up either for him or against him. Mary's heart must have ached. Finally one Friday it happened, what she feared came to pass. Her son was led up to a hilltop, amidst a jeering crowd, led by priests and rulers of his own nation, and there on that hill top her son hung upon a cross as his mother stood beneath that cross and cried. This is not what most people would consider be a life of someone favored, but Mary was called upon by God to bring God's presence into the world.

We many times forget that Jesus, the Son of God, was also the son of Mary. Because of that, he did things that God can't do! He was born. He grew up. He died. Because Jesus, the son of Mary, was human, he rejoiced at a wedding. He wept at the death of a friend. He was misunderstood. He suffered mental and emotional anguish. He experienced physical pain. He felt abandoned by God. We can know that the "Most High God" not only knows, but has experienced everything that we experience. We also live with the hope and expectation that as the son of Mary, a human like us, has died and was raised from death, we, too, can expect to follow where he has led the way.

God had to come to earth, had to be born, had to experience the human condition so that His redemption might come to all of us. The Christmas event is not difficult to understand. It began with God's grace or favor coming to Mary and it ended not on Christmas Day with the birth of Jesus, but it ended on Easter with the resurrection of Jesus.

God uses people to bring His grace into this world. Being called by God does not mean an easy life, but we need to be like Mary and have faith. May we have the strength of faith that allows us to say yes when we are called. God does incredible

things and sometimes asks us to take part in them. What is your answer to His call?
Amen

Benediction:

God of Light and Hope, in whom there is no darkness, cause your light to shine on us and through us to others, that they may know of you and of your Love. Let us witness to your gift of Jesus who came and taught us how to live as children of Light. Go in peace, dear friends, and know that the God of light, hope, peace, and joy goes with you. AMEN.