

“Perceiving the Presence of God”

Salado UMC—24 December 2017

Advent IV

10:00 am—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 1:26-38

**“Absence sharpens love, presence strengthens it”
(English Proverb).**

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Hear our day’s lesson:

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’

29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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 ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’

34 Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ 35 The angel said to her, ‘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 holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.’ 38 Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her (Luke 1:26-38).

The late Edmund Steimle wrote this story:

I think I shall never forget the time when hurricane Hazel, back in the fifties, swept through eastern Pennsylvania and hit Philadelphia head-on, where we were living at the time. Unlike most hurricanes, which lose much of their force when they turn inland, this one hit with all the fury of a hurricane at sea: drenching rains, screaming winds, trees uprooted, branches flying through the air, broken power lines crackling on the pavements. It was frightening. Then suddenly there was a letup, a lull. Shortly all was still. Not a leaf quivered. The sun even broke through briefly. It was the eye of the storm. “All was calm, all was bright.” And then all hell broke loose again: branches and trees crashing down, the screaming winds, the torrential rain, the power lines throwing out sparks on the pavement. But that was a breathless moment—when we experienced the eye of the storm (Edmund Steimle, *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, Editors: Thomas Long & Cornelius Plantinga, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI: 1994, p. 239).

Let's hope for the next few days we are in the eye of the Advent/Christmas hurricane. For these few days I hope we have a time of calm to renew our spirits and to reconnect with those whom people we love. In fact, our Bible lesson from Luke's Gospel lends itself to calming our anxiety about the gap between the ideal Christmas we imagine and the reality in which we live—North Korea, our health issues, our investment issues, our budget issues, our security issues, our relationship issues with spouses, children, parents, and humankind. We want things to be nice and neat and all tied up in a bow—and we do our best to control the celebrations of the seasons. Yet, most of the time, if we were honest, Christmas just seems like a storm!

I suggest that "Mary provides us with one of the most profound accounts of faithful obedience and humility in all of Scripture." What the angel revealed to Mary would have put her out of favor with family, friends, and community—beyond any shadow of a doubt. This was the olden days when being unmarried and pregnant was "not cool." First century Nazareth was a long way from Jamie Lynn Spears, star of the Nickelodeon television series "Zoey 101," which bit the dust in May of 2008. A decade ago, she got far too much tabloid attention for her pregnancy. Likewise, the 2007 movie *Juno* has Juno MacGuff, the film's 16-year-old pregnant protagonist deciding to give her baby up for adoption. We need to understand that what Mary faced was something other than celebrity when she got her news from the angel Gabriel. She got a big dose of reality's shame and embarrassment—perhaps worse.

Yet what astounds us as we read Mary's story is that we see in Mary the calm at the eye of an Advent/Christmas storm. Can we learn from this? Can the Light of Christ enable us to remain calm in the midst of the anxiety and fear that swirls around us all the time? Can we with Mary learn to say, "Here am I" as we respond to God's good news?

Jim Moore points out that Mary had attributes that helped her say "Here am I" and accept the light of Christ God thrust on her. Mary was a person of great hope because she heard God's voice, obeyed God's will, and trusted God's power. These faith characteristics of hearing, obedience, and trust are those traits that, all other evidence to the contrary, give hope. Mary is a testament to acceptance of God's light as a prelude to God's promise. But it is not easy to remain both faithful and calm in the eye of a storm.

Some years ago, an older woman testified in a dramatic trial. Everyone knew the opposing lawyer as tough, even heartless, and he was really badgering the witness. Shouting, pointing his finger, the lawyer used all kinds of tricks to fluster the woman. Quiet within, she prayed for strength. She asked God to help her keep her poise and find the right words. Just then the lawyer went into a tirade, asking sarcastic, ruthless questions, gesturing in a demeaning way, and with belittling shouting.

When he finished his questions, she leaned forward, looked him squarely in the eye, and said, "I'm not sure I caught all that. Could you please **scream** that at me again?" After she said that, the jury broke up in laughter, the courtroom spectators applauded, the judge chuckled, and the fully crushed lawyer said, "Oh, forget it! No more questions" (James Moore, *When All Else Fails, Read the Instructions*, Dimensions for Living Press, Nashville, 1993 p. 43). Christians remember what God has done and how God's presence steadies them. Mary accepted the light and it anchored her amid a turbulent world. God offers each of us the gift he gave Mary.

Once upon a time there was a piece of iron that was very strong and very hard. Many tried to break it, but failed. "I'll master it," said the ax. And its blows fell heavily upon the piece of iron, but every blow only made the ax's edge blunter. The ax finally gave up in frustration.

“Leave it to me,” said the saw, and it worked back and forth on the iron’s surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. In despair, the saw also quit trying and fell to the ground.

“Shall I try?” asked the small soft flame.

“Forget it,” everyone else said. “What can you do? You’re too small, and you have no strength.” But the small soft flame curled around the piece of iron, embraced it, and never stopped until the iron melted under its warm, irresistible influence.

This is how God saves God’s people. Not by the brute strength of God’s purposes raining down on us like an ax, and certainly not like the constant pressure of a saw going back and forth until we relent and surrender. No! God’s spirit revealed in the light of Christ—born in a stable, placed in a manger—warms us, embraces us, and entices us by love to accept God’s acceptance of us. God loves us into God’s realm. God does not coerce or force us into the Kingdom. God loves us gently, gradually, and completely with all the love that God offers in the light of Jesus Christ. Or as Fred Pratt Green’s hymn puts it, “Christ is the world’s light.”

So, this Christmas, don’t forget to remember that God loves you—and you will know this when you accept the light of Christ.

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