

GABRIEL, MARY, AND THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B)

December 24, 2017



Pastor David J. Risendal

www.OneLittleWord.org
drisendal@StPLC.org
facebook | Dave Risendal
Twitter: drisendal

Saint Peter Lutheran Church

9300 East Belleview Avenue
Greenwood Village, CO 80111
voice: 303/770-9300
fax: 303/770-9301
www.StPLC.org
facebook.com/StPLC

Lessons

2nd Samuel 7:1-11, 16
St. Luke 1:46b-55
or Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
St. Luke 1:26-38

Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that would obstruct your mercy, that willingly we may bear your redeeming love to all the world, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

*a servant of God
Mary, Mother of our Lord
strong, bold and faithful*

Sermon

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.*¹ Amen.

I heard about the funniest conversation this past week. A church member relayed it to her Pastor. She said that she had run into a neighbor, and happened to mention the church where she was a member. "Oh, what a coincidence." the neighbor said. "That is our church too!" "Really?" said the church member. I don't think I've ever seen you there before. What service do you attend?" The neighbor replied, "The Christmas service."

¹ Romans 1:7, 1st Corinthians 1:3, 2nd Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2nd Thessalonians 1:2, Philemon 3; New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Tonight, we'll have a number of neighbors stop by to worship with us, as they do every year. And, honestly, we'll be delighted to have them with us. I've been praying for them this past week, that this Christmas season might touch their hearts, and inspire the role Christ plays in their lives. If joining us for an hour of prayer, praise and thanksgiving helps that along, all the much better. So if you happen to see someone this evening whom you don't recognize, I hope you'll see that as an opportunity for us and for them. Please help them feel as welcomed and as appreciated as you can.

But I'm not guessing there are many once-a-year worshippers with us this hour. In fact, I'd guess that on the morning of Christmas Eve, which this year just happens to be the Fourth Sunday of Advent, few Christians even know we are gathered here, and fewer yet take advantage of it. Those of you who are here now are what we Pastors refer to as the A-Team. Believers who have a deep commitment to Sunday morning worship, and wouldn't think of missing it — even when so much else is going on all around us. So thank you for being here today. You are every bit as appreciated here this morning as all the others will be tonight.

I also want you to know that I'm glad for the chance to preach today. Often, when Christmas Eve is on a Sunday, churches will have some special event to try and draw their people to attend — maybe a Christmas pageant, featuring all of the kids of the church (who, not coincidentally, will be accompanied by parents and siblings and aunts and uncles and grandparents...). But I've always had a love-hate relationship with Christmas pageants. They are fun, to be sure. And the kids can be so cute. And in their own way, they do give us a chance to tell the Christmas story.

But every Christmas pageant I've ever seen has been a mash-up of our Gospel accounts. John and Mark tell us nothing, of course. They don't seem to have any interest at all in the story of Jesus' birth, so it is left to Matthew and Luke to tell the story.

Matthew really is Joseph's story. It tells us about his change-of-heart. When an angel in a dream informs him that Mary's child is from God, he decides not to divorce her quietly, instead choosing to become her husband and Jesus' father. Strangely enough, there is no mention of Nazareth until much later in Matthew. Jesus seems to have been conceived and born in Bethlehem, where Joseph and Mary live with him until he is about two years old. It is then that Matthew describes the visit of the Wise men from the east, and Herod's fit of rage that caused him to kill all the babies in and around Bethlehem that were Jesus' age or younger.

It's Luke, of course, who tells us about the visits from the angel Gabriel. One visit is to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer. The other visit is to Mary, the mother of Jesus — the story told in this morning's Gospel lesson. Luke also describes Mary's trip to Elizabeth's and Zechariah's home, and the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where they end up at the inn with no vacancies, which leads us to the shepherds, and the angels, and the chaos in the stable.

So one way to deal with all of this is to just fit the pieces of the two separate stories together in the way that makes the most chronological sense. Most Christmas Pageants, of course, ignore Matthew's information about Nazareth, and they end the story before Herod sends his soldiers to Bethlehem. So we end up, mostly, with Luke's version of the story — and if we're lucky, Matthew's wise men show up at the stable before the curtain closes. You see the problem: when we try to force these unique narratives together, they lose their individual voice.

Which is why I like this Sunday. Every third year, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, if the sermon doesn't get pre-empted by some other activity, we turn to this exchange between Gabriel and Mary in St. Luke's Gospel. So let's take a look at it.

As I mentioned, the story actually begins with the angel Gabriel, and Zechariah, and the birth of St. John, the Baptizer. Luke begins his gospel by weaving in and out of these two dramatic birth stories. John, of course, is born to Zechariah (who is a priest, serving in the temple at Jerusalem) and Elizabeth (who is a descendant of Aaron, who served with Moses to bring God's people out of their slavery in Egypt). Jesus is born to Joseph (who is a descendant of King David) and Mary (who is an unknown young woman, living in a small village in Galilee). What's more: these two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, are related.

In these parallel accounts, each story includes:

- An announcement from the angel Gabriel,
- A miraculous birth,
- Shocked reactions from those who hear the news,
- Songs of thanks and praise (from Zechariah and Mary),
- And no small amount of suspense before the end of the story plays out.

So here's the opportunity that lays before us today: can we hear just this story? Just the story of this meeting between the angel Gabriel and young Mary? And explore how it might help us better appreciate the story we'll recall tonight, which also is from St. Luke's birth narrative?

And here's an idea: since you are the Saint Peter Worshipping A-Team, I'm guessing you would have as many insights into this text as I might. So why don't you help me with the preaching of the sermon this morning? I'm going to read the text to you again, and ask you to think of these two questions: (1) What do you notice about this story? and (2) What do you wonder about this story? Here goes:

1.26 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 forever, 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. ²

So what did you notice?

- Mary’s response is perfect.
- As is the case with so many of God’s servants, Mary has no choice.
- Joseph is from the house of David, and Mary is not.
- Mary is adopted into the story of God.
- Mary is still alive today, as our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters honor her.
- The angel was so gentle with Mary.
- When an angel says, “Do not be afraid!” there is probably good reason to be afraid.

And what do you wonder?

- What does Mary believe / understand?
- Mary is told that her son will have the throne of David, but doesn’t that throne end up being in heaven?
- How does the angel appear? What does Mary see?
- Why didn’t Mary just walk away in fear?
- How did this experience change the relationship between Mary and Joseph?
- Why does the angel disappear? Mary could have used Gabriel at her side.
- If I am one of God’s “favored ones” what will be asked of me?

I noticed:

- When God Almighty went looking for someone to mother Jesus, it was to a young girl in a small, insignificant town.
- People are usually afraid when they meet angels. Mary is “perplexed.” (Yet the angel invites her not to be afraid — was that just force of habit, or does the angel see fear in Mary’s eyes?)
- Mary doesn’t question the trajectory of Jesus’ life — only that she is a virgin, and unable to be pregnant.
- The angel declares that “the Holy Spirit will come upon her,” and “the power of the Most High will overshadow her,” but he doesn’t necessarily declare (ahead of time) that she will give birth as a virgin.
- Despite these two women being in unusual (maybe difficult) situations, Gabriel declares that “nothing is impossible with God.”

² St. Luke 1:26-38, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

And I wondered:

- Why is it important to note that Joseph is a descendant of David, since he has no genetic ties to Jesus?
- Why is Mary the “favored one” of God? What has she done to deserve this description?
- What does Mary understand about this coming child, when he is described as: (1) the Son of the Most High, (2) destined to sit on the throne of King David, (3) the one who will rule over the house of Jacob forever, (4) holy, and (5) the Son of God?
- Is it encouraging for Mary to hear that Elizabeth is also in a similar situation? Does it make her feel less alone?
- Why is Mary so willing to go along with this, despite the risks involved?

This is an amazing story, told by St. Luke in an extraordinary way. And as we read slowly and carefully enough to notice what this story is telling us, and to wonder what it might mean for us, we find ourselves invited into the Christmas story in a new and fresh way.

Can I give you a little homework? One last little bit of Advent preparing? I’m assuming that we’ll see most of you this evening. Let me suggest that you take some time this afternoon to read the first chapter of St. Luke and the first twenty verses of the second chapter before you come to this evening’s services. Take your time with these stories. Let yourself be drawn into them, as you imagine what it must have been like to be Zechariah or Elizabeth or Mary or Joseph. As we take time to notice and wonder a bit about the beginning of Jesus’ story, we just might experience the story of his birth in a new and more powerful way.

A blessed Advent to you all. We’ve got about five-and-a-half hours left before the Christmas season begins. May God bless us all, as we prepare in our hearts and our homes a place for Christ to be born anew.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text ³

^{1.26} 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 forever, 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

³ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/Lectionary.

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. ⁴

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{1:26} Ἐν δὲ τῷ μηνὶ τῷ ἕκτῳ ἀπεστάλη ὁ ἄγγελος Γαβριήλ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ εἰς πόλιν τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἣ ὄνομα Ναζαρέθ ²⁷ πρὸς παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὄνομα Ἰωσήφ ἐξ οἴκου Δαυὶδ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς παρθένου Μαριάμ. ²⁸ καὶ εἰσελθὼν πρὸς αὐτὴν εἶπεν χαίρει, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ. ²⁹ ἢ δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ διεταράχθη καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἶη ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος. ³⁰ καὶ εἶπεν ὁ ἄγγελος αὐτῇ μὴ φοβοῦ, Μαριάμ, εὗρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. ³¹ καὶ ἰδοὺ συλλήμψῃ ἐν γαστρὶ καὶ τέξῃ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν. ³² οὗτος ἔσται μέγας καὶ υἱὸς ὑψίστου κληθήσεται καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τὸν θρόνον Δαυὶδ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ, ³³ καὶ βασιλεύσει ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον Ἰακώβ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας καὶ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔσται τέλος. ³⁴ εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο, ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω; ³⁵ καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ ἄγγελος εἶπεν αὐτῇ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δύναμις ὑψίστου ἐπισκιάσει σοὶ διὸ καὶ τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον κληθήσεται υἱὸς θεοῦ. ³⁶ καὶ ἰδοὺ Ἑλισάβετ ἡ συγγενὴς σου καὶ αὐτὴ συνείληφεν υἱὸν ἐν γήρει αὐτῆς καὶ οὗτος μὴν ἕκτος ἐστὶν αὐτῇ τῇ καλουμένῃ στείρα ³⁷ ὅτι οὐκ ἀδυνατήσῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥῆμα. ³⁸ εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ ἰδοὺ ἡ δούλη κυρίου γένοιτο μοι κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμα σου. καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτῆς ὁ ἄγγελος. ⁵

Psalm; English Text

^{1.46} And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁶

Psalm; Greek Text

⁴ St. Luke 1:26-38, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

⁵ St. Luke 1:26-38, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

⁶ St. Luke 1:46b-55, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

1.46 Καὶ εἶπεν Μαριάμ· Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον, 47καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμα μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρι μου, 48ὅτι ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης αὐτοῦ. Ἴδου γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μακαριοῦσιν μεπᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί, 49ὅτι ἐποίησεν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός. καὶ ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, 50καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς τοῖς φοβουμένοις αὐτόν. 51Ἐποίησεν κράτος ἐν βραχίονι αὐτοῦ, διεσκόρπισεν ὑπερηφάνους διανοίᾳ καρδίας αὐτῶν· 52καθεῖλεν δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων καὶ ὕψωσεν ταπεινοὺς, 53πεινῶντας ἐνέπλησεν ἀγαθῶν καὶ πλουτοῦντας ἐξαπέστειλεν κενούς. 54ἀντελάβετο Ἰσραὴλ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, μνησθῆναι ἐλέους, 55καθὼς ἐλάλησεν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν, τῷ Ἀβραὰμ καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. 7

First Lesson; English Text:

7.1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. 8

Second Lesson; English Text:

16.25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the

7 St. Luke 1:46b-55, The Greek New Testament, *opp. cit.*

8 2nd Samuel 7:1-11, 16, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. ⁹

Second Lesson; Greek Text:

^{16:25} [Τῷ δὲ δυναμένῳ ὑμᾶς στηρίξαι κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου χρόνοις αἰωνίοις σεσιγημένου, ²⁶φανερωθέντος δὲ νῦν διὰ τε γραφῶν προφητικῶν κατ' ἐπιταγὴν τοῦ αἰωνίου θεοῦ εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη γνωρισθέντος, ²⁷μόνῳ σοφῷ θεῷ, διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ᾧ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.] ¹⁰

⁹ Romans 16:25-27, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

¹⁰ Romans 16:25-27, The Greek New Testament, *opp. cit.*