

“When Hope Turns Your World Upside Down”

Sermon Series on

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(Lk. 1:26-38)

Introduction.

There are some events in history which feel like they turned the world upside down. The American Revolution is one of these, and Heather wrote about it in today’s Advent devotional. On the morning of October 17th, an officer emerged from the British lines holding a white handkerchief, and late that afternoon General Cornwallis made a formal offer of surrender.

Then on October 20th, the British troops marched to an open field near Yorktown, VA, and there they surrendered their weapons and their colors, and they were taken prisoner. As they marched to the field that day, the musicians of the British army played a popular English ballad that was written in the 1640s. It was entitled “The World Turned Upside Down.”

Indeed, the upstart colony had thrown off the shackles of the mighty British Empire, one of the most powerful nations on earth, and the American experiment of a constitutional democracy – the first of its kind in history – truly did turn the world upside down. The world has never been the same since.

If that is the case when it comes to the American revolution, it was even more true when Jesus was born and He inaugurated a revolution of love. The birth of Christ turned the world upside down more than any other event in human history. Perhaps a song should be written about the appearance of an angel to a young girl named Mary and how this angelic visit and her response of hope turned the world upside down too.

I. The Visit of the Angel.

Christmas art tends to depict Jesus’ family as icons stamped in gold foil with a calm Mary receiving the greeting of the angel as some kind of holy benediction. But that isn’t at all the

way Luke tells the story. Mary was afraid when the angel appeared, and the text tells us she was greatly troubled by what the heavenly messenger said. And when the angel explained that she was going to become the mother of the Son of God, Mary has something far more mundane on her mind – “*But I’m a virgin!*”

Later on, when Mary hurried off to the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth (the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through), Elizabeth believed Mary, and she shared in her joy. However, the scene poignantly highlights the contrast between these two women juxtaposed to one another: the whole countryside is excitedly rejoicing about the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy even as Mary has to hide the apparent shame of her own miracle.

It’s fascinating to think that the fate of the world rested on the responses of two poor teenagers who lived in a small town in the backwaters of Palestine. How many times did Mary replay the angel’s words in her mind again as she felt the Son of God kicking against the walls of her uterus? How many times did Joseph second-guess his own encounter with an angel (which we’ll talk about next week). “Was it just a dream? Did it all really happen?”

Mary does not strike one as a very likely candidate to be the mother of the Son of God. Let’s face it. She was probably very young, barely a teenager, perhaps 13 or 14 years old. She was a woman engaged to be married, and in the ancient world in Palestine a woman had very few rights and little authority except through her husband or her father. She was poor, and she was a Jew. She was part of a race of people who were marginalized and whose nation was a vassal state under the oppressive rule of the Roman empire. Today we would call her a “nobody.”

In so many ways, she was an unlikely candidate for this holy mission, and I suspect that Mary herself felt unqualified for the task. Our text even tells us that when the angel Gabriel spoke to her, Mary was greatly troubled and wondered what the greeting meant. Mary didn’t feel qualified to be the mother of the long-promised, long-awaited, long-hoped-for Messiah.

And I think that’s the point. Most of us think we’re unqualified to be used by God, and none of us feels like we have it all together spiritually. We feel like spiritual failures most of the time because of how often we blow it. We know we need a Savior.

The good news of this passage – the hopeful message of this text, is that God favored Mary, and He favors us, not because of anything we have done or how we measure up spiritually. Rather, God shows us His favor simply because of His loving kindness and grace. The favor of God came to Mary not because of her superior qualifications, but because of God’s magnanimous love. And that’s the same way it comes to any of us.

The one thing Mary had going for her was her willingness to be used by God. It wasn’t her ability that made her the ideal choice to bear the Son of God. It was her *availability*. And her willingness to surrender was all it took for God to do a miracle. How does God want you to be available to Him this Christmas? How is He inviting you to surrender to His call?

II. The Four Stages of Mary's Response.

If you study this passage closely, you'll discover that the angel speaks to Mary three times, and three times she responds to him. And in her responses, Mary reveals four stages of a spiritual journey that leads her to a place of radical acceptance and a willingness to embrace God's plan for her life.

The first stage is **fear and confusion**. The Bible says she was afraid at the sight of an angel, and I think I would be too! She was utterly perplexed by his statement that she was highly favored by God. The Greek word that is translated "wondered" in this passage literally means to use logic and look for empirical evidence. It wasn't any easier for Mary to make sense of an angel appearing to her and saying that she had the favor of God than it would be for you or me. At first her experience was one of fear and confusion.

The second stage is **doubt**. In essence, Mary's initial response is, "This isn't going to work. I'm a virgin. My fiancé Joseph and I haven't slept together, and we don't plan to before we get married. So I can't be pregnant; I can't get pregnant." I'm always encouraged whenever I read this story, because it reminds me that even great people of faith in the Bible wrestle with mundane questions and doubt just like I do. It assures me that I'm not the only one who struggles and on occasion has a hard time getting my head around the mystery of the Incarnation and how God chooses to work in the world.

The third stage of Mary's response is **surrender**. After hearing Gabriel's answer about the miracle that was about to take place, that nothing is impossible with God, and how God was going to bring salvation to the world through her Son, and Mary was able to work her way to faith, acceptance, and submission. And she responded by saying, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*"

This is a remarkable response. Mary was willing to take the angel at his word and do God's will even though she had no idea how Joseph was going to react to the news or how any of this was going to turn out. And the way it played out ended up being a very tough row to hoe. Her life was not an easy one. She took a big step of faith, and she put her trust in God.

It was a statement of surrender, but it was also a statement of identity. "I am the Lord's servant." The basic core of Mary's identity was as a servant of the Lord. Her primary goal in life was no longer to scrap and fight for her piece of the pie like so many of us feel like we have to do these days in order to get ahead. Instead, she was able to surrender and to be used by God.

Many people know the Serenity Prayer. You know – "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." It was written by the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1933. But do you know the rest of that prayer?

Living one day at a time;

Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardship
As the pathway to peace.
Taking as He did,
This sinful world as it is
Not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make
All things right
If I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy
in this life,
And supremely happy
With Him forever in the next.

Have you come to that place of surrender in your life? Is your identity and your security solidly in a place where you can rest in the fact that God loves you and He wants the best for you? That's the key to being able to surrender.

Later on today, try this spiritual exercise. It's called "palms down, palms up." Begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication that your desire is to turn over any concerns you may have with God. Inwardly pray, "Lord, I give them over to you. I give you my anger toward my coworker. I release my fear of my doctor's appointment later this week. I surrender my anxiety over the sales call tomorrow, as well as my worry about my finances. And I give you my children." Whatever concerns you, just say "palms down."

After several minutes of surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you can pray silently or aloud, "Lord, I would like to receive from You Your divine love for my coworker, and Your peace about the doctor's appointment, and patience and trust about my work and our finances, and I accept whatever your plans are for my children." Whatever you need, say, "Palms up." Try this and see what God does in your life.

The final stage is **joy**. This stage doesn't appear here in our passage today, but it shows up later in the story when Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. There she sings her song of praise. Mary says, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (1:46,47). This passage in Luke 1 is often referred to as the *Magnificat*, and it's a powerful song of joy which talks about how, with the coming of the Messiah, the powerful and the proud are brought low, but the meek and the humble are raised up. It says that God has filled the hungry with good things, but He has sent the rich away empty.

In the song Mary sings she says that God turned the world upside down when He began the miracle of the Incarnation. She could see it coming. Earlier in my sermon I said perhaps someone should write a song about how the birth of Jesus turned the world upside down. Someone did. It was Mary.

Conclusion and Application.

Where are you today on your journey through Advent? Can you identify what stage you're at in this season of your life? Are you fearful this Christmas, and are you afraid of something that might happen in the future? Perhaps it's a fear you aren't going to get into the college you most want to attend. Or maybe you're wondering how you're going to pay all the bills this Christmas

You might be at the stage of doubt, and you're just having a difficult time even believing the Christmas story. Maybe the miracle of the Incarnation sounds like a fantasy to you, and it's hard to get your head around everything the Bible says happened that first Christmas. Or maybe you just don't trust God, and you wonder what He is up to in your life. It's okay to ask honest questions and to wrestle with doubts as a follower of Jesus. God isn't afraid of your questions, and neither is our church. First Pres is a safe place to wrestle with doubt.

Perhaps in your journey of faith, and maybe even during this sermon, you've arrived at the stage of surrender, and you're willing to respond like Mary and say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Is God asking you to surrender something to Him right now? Can you take that step of faith and say, "I surrender this to you, Lord"? Tell the Lord what's on your heart.

Or maybe this has all led you to a place of great joy, and you're just thanking God for what He's done and what He is doing in your life. Wherever you are on your journey, God is with you, and He has shown you His favor. Trust in His love, and look for Jesus to bless you in a special way this Christmas.

Years later, after the child Mary gave birth to that first Christmas had grown up and become a man, the words she said in the prayer in this passage would be repeated by the Son of God Himself in a garden just before His death on a cross. You'll remember that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, in effect, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to Me as you have said," when He prayed, "Not my will but yours be done, Father." I wonder where He learned that?

May the radical surrender of Jesus, and that of His mother Mary, be an example for all of us this Christmas and always. It just might turn the world upside down again. Amen.