

*Luke 1:26* In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." <sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Dear Friends in Christ,

"It is more blessed to give than to receive!" Other than three-year-olds and psychopaths, we all know that. But it's kind of like vegetables and ice cream. We all know which one is better for us, but we also know which one we like more. Christmas gift exchanging is an excellent chance to teach children, and for adults to remind themselves, that expecting to give is better, healthier and more God-pleasing than expecting to receive.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive," is a direct quotation from the Bible (Acts 20:35). Yet even people who know nothing of the Bible know this. Even if people don't know why, everyone realizes the healthiness of this time of year: When charitable giving is at its highest, when bell-ringers stand outside stores and can expect the good will of strangers, when each of us finds great joy in buying someone else exactly what "he" wanted or what "she" never expected. We thank God that even when humanity fell, God has still left a whisper of his image in each of us. (Let me be clear, I am not saying that people are good-with-God by being nice. But it is a blessing that God has left echoes of his law in each person's heart. We call this the conscience.)

Well, if "it is more blessed to give than to receive," then it begs a question: What do we do when we get something? Should we feel guilty? Should we give it away? What if the dollar amount of gifts I receive this Christmas is greater than the dollar amount of gifts I give? Am I a bad person? Have I sinned?

And if "it is more blessed to give than to receive," should I even be excited when I see a wrapped present with my name on it? Is that excitement wrong? When I shake the box and set my imagination loose, is that selfish?

We all know that "it is better to give than to receive." Now I hope I am not going to get myself into trouble, but I am going to suggest something that sounds almost like heresy. I would suggest that Christmas is actually more about getting gifts than giving gifts. Let me say that again. I believe that Christmas is less about giving gifts than it is about getting gifts, or more properly, getting *a* gift. Well, if Christmas is about receiving a gift, then now is when we should learn how to be good gift getters. As Gabriel speaks to Mary, we should learn how to be

#### GOOD GIFT-GETTERS

God's ancient people, for a lot longer than we with our 250 year flash-in-the-pan history can imagine, for a long time God's people yearned for the greatest gift of all, a Savior. God had promised it. They were

waiting for it. Generations passed. Empires ruled and rusted. Cities were built and abandoned. That is how long God's people were waiting for God's Messiah.

The very young woman of our reading, with a name that goes back to the sister of Moses, shared in that hope. Mary hoped for a Savior. I am 100% certain that Mary, Mother of Jesus, never imagined that she would have a primary role in the Messiah's life. I do not think that every Jewish girl grew up hoping that, "Hey, maybe my child will be the Messiah." If Mary had imagined that, my guess is that God would not have chosen her. Mary surely never thought that the names of her parents and friends and neighbors would be forgotten in the mists of time, and that hers would be the one name remembered for the ages. She waited for the salvation of Israel like all the religious girls and young women, and boys and young men of her day did. She waited for the Messiah's first coming, like we wait for his second. She waited with a faith in the LORD, the gracious God of Israel. She lived in the certainty that one day God's Messiah would come, and that she was just one of many millions sharing that hope.

Yet God's messenger straight from the throne-room of heaven stands in her house. The angel Gabriel tells her that God has a special message for her. ***"Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you."***

Take note of what Gabriel said! He described Mary as ***"You who are highly favored."*** In the Greek, the word for "highly favored" is "you who are shown grace." Gabriel says that his message is a gift freely given by God. It does not downplay Mary, but it does say that God was under no obligation to give her this gift. In that specific point we find value in this event. If Mary were categorically different from the rest of us, like the Catholics hold Mary to be sinless, we could learn very little from this event! But Mary needed a Savior as badly as you and I do. So when we look at this event, we remember—and this is no slur against Mary—this story is primarily not about Mary but about Jesus. Had there been no Jesus, we would've never heard of Mary. Yet from her we can learn.

We soon see what is truly admirable about Mary. Mary responds with the heart of a child of God. Before the angel Gabriel she does not think like a spoiled child at the Christmas tree, "Well, this had better be worth it! God'd better give me something I like." Instead, she ***"was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be."*** Do you hear Mary's self-conscious humility? Mary is not one of the high and mighty. Her humble station in life has prepared her for a healthy relationship with God. She self-consciously wonders, "What God can have to do with me? I am just a young woman, in an out-of-the-way place, with no grand designs on life, just wanting to have a nice home with a decent husband and children. What is this news, not from some king, but from God himself?!"

Mary, without even trying, how well you teach us to get ready for the greatest Christmas gift of all! We should realize that every blessing and favor from God is undeserved, something we should be awe-struck about.

Yet the gift has not even been announced. Now Gabriel gets down to the reason he is here. He says, ***"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you will..., and he will..."*** And Gabriel went on to talk about this promised son and who he was, but it seems like Mary didn't hear anything past the first sentence. After Gabriel speaks his peace, Mary kind of like says, "Wait a minute, what was that first thing you said?" Only she says it with better manners: ***"How can this be, since I do not know a man?"*** (NKJV).

God was giving her a gift, but she is puzzled by that gift. How can this be? She knows where babies come from, and this just isn't going to work out. Gabriel seems to be saying something truly miraculous. So God, in his patience and love for this young woman, explains that she has indeed understood correctly. Through Gabriel God explains. ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."*** This explanation will not satisfy the arrogant, scoffing mind. But this explanation was more than enough for Mary and every heart of faith.

Those who believe that the Lord God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them, believe he can do this. God who created the double helix of DNA and ordered our 23 chromosomes, certainly is

able to do just what he said through a virgin birth. We Christians have no problem with defining exactly “how” this happened, because we accept that when God says he is going to do something, we believe him.

Anyway, hearing Gabriel’s message, imagine what Mary might have thought. She was a young woman of marriageable age. In fact, she was engaged, wedding plans in place, invitations ordered, banquet hall reserved, dress paid for, and now she was going to inexplicably fall pregnant! Mary lived in a time when having a child out of wedlock correctly carried a stigma. What will happen when her fiancé finds out? What about her hopes for a family gathered around the dining room table? What about her place in society? What will her parents think of her? What will the community think of her parents? Even if she were to explain it, who would believe her?

Has God ever put you in that place in life? Where you know what God wants you to do, but you know it will probably cost you something? It will cost too much, be too much work, cause me to have to give up things I really wanted?

Might we just shout out to God, “This isn’t the gift I wanted!”

Not Mary. Mary responded, “***I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.***” Mary was ready for God’s gift. She would accept whatever God had wrapped into her life.

Sometimes we think of faith as achieving great things: wrestling in prayer, fighting with temptation, defying the expectations of the world, Onward Christian Soldiers, and all that. That is all true; faith does all those things. But if faith does not have what Mary showed, then it is not faith. Faith is first, before anything else, trust.

Psalms 131 describes faith beautifully, perhaps more beautifully than any other place in the Bible. I would invite you to read Psalm 131 at home sometime this week. But it is such a beautiful picture that I have to tell you about it. Psalm 131 says that faith in God is like a two-year-old child at his best moments. It is like a two-year-old hanging onto his mother’s skirt. As long as he has a hold of that skirt, he is good. But take it away, and watch panic spread across the child’s face. But faith is like that child with a corner of his mother’s skirt clenched in his chubby little hand. He is content and needs nothing else.

Now you might say, “But saving faith is all about Jesus!” You are correct. Someone else might say, “Faith is good, but faith without works is dead.” You, too, are correct. But let me divide faith into a pie with three pieces. (You should like that. Not even a four piece pie, just three!) Anyway, divide faith into three parts. The *object* of our faith is Jesus as our Savior. The *result* of faith is that we thank God with our lives. But *faith itself* is the words of Mary, “***I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.***”

Faith is trust. Faith is good gift-getting – a trust that whatever God sends us wrapped up in each day, is what he has carefully, lovingly given to us, or what he allowed to come to us but only with his permission. Faith is a certainty that at Christmas, we remember the most valuable gift we could ever possibly receive, a Savior from sin.

All of the worry that we experience in life is sin, because it is the opposite of trust and faith. All of the complaining about our life is sin, because it is ungratefulness for what God has allocated to us. All the demands for an explanation from God are sin, because they are doubt that God really knows what he is doing.

But true faith is a certainty that “*what God ordains is always good.*” May we on the other 364 days of the year, but especially today on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, live out the words of the hymn we sang not too long ago, “My soul in stillness waits” for we are the Lord’s servants. Amen.