

According to Your Word – December 24, 2009 – Christmas Eve
Luke 1: 26-32

This evening we have heard the account of the visit by the angel Gabriel to a young and vulnerable Mary at about the time that her aunt Elizabeth was six months pregnant with the infant who will in time grow up to be John the Baptist.

Gabriel appears suddenly without warning, greets Mary, tells her that she has been set apart from God ... called, if you will, for a special task - or blessing... Gabriel at first does not say what. And then Gabriel announces to Mary that God is with her, that she need not be afraid of either the angel's presence or the task that she is to do - for she will conceive through the power and work of the Holy Spirit and give birth to a Son, who will be called Jesus and this Jesus whom she will carry and deliver will be the Son of God.

At the time of this visit by the angel Gabriel, Mary is young, unknown, powerless, inconsequential, and a virgin – a person without any position or place or voice. Her question to Gabriel, then, is perfectly understandable.

“How can this be? Mary asks. She could have just as easily asked, “Why me?” And she could have just as easily replied, “You got the wrong girl, Gabriel. Go find someone more suited for this task.”

But, when Gabriel answers Mary's questions, anxieties, and concerns by reminding her that with God all things are possible, Mary responds with words that are, simply put, the model for Christian discipleship: “Here am I,” Mary says, “God's servant. Let it be with me according to your Word.”

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A little over thirty years after this visit from the angel Gabriel, Mary is attending a wedding in the town of Cana in Galilee where her son Jesus is one of the guests and where her son Jesus will perform what is only called in John's Gospel a sign or a wonder, meaning an act by Jesus that is intended to reveal publicly that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

We know this story. This is, of course, the story of Jesus turning water into wine. Many scholars believe that the groom at this wedding is Jude, the writer of the brief letter near the very end of the Bible, and who, according to Biblical legend is the half-brother of Jesus.

So, it makes sense that Mary and Jesus would be at this wedding. We know that at this wedding there is a not so minor crisis in the kitchen. The hosts have run out of wine; and Mary turns to her son Jesus to fix things. When at last Jesus agrees to intervene, his mother Mary has but one instruction to the kitchen servants who will soon become participants in this Jesus' first ever miracle. She says to them, “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

Good advice for kitchen servants; and absolutely necessary guidance for us“... Do whatever Jesus tells you to do.”

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About a year or so after the wedding in Cana, Jesus is deeply in the midst of his ministry. He has recruited and trained and taught the first twelve disciples, including Jude. He has sent not only these core twelve disciples but others as well to both proclaim and to live out the Good News that God's Kingdom - that is to say, God's rule - is gaining ground, one saved person at a time, and as a consequence, God is healing and transforming this broken world, one hurting but now healed person at a time.

Jesus has taught people to pray, Jesus has taught in parables, Jesus has lifted up those who have been wounded and marginalized by life. And we find Jesus, as it is recorded at the very end of Matthew 11, inviting someone... it does not say whom... I believe that Jesus is inviting us... with these extraordinary words:

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke - take my burden - upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

We know these words from Jesus as well as we know the story about the wedding at Cana and water being turned into wine... But perhaps we know these words too well; or at least we have learned them too quickly...

For if we read it in a rush, these words from Jesus can seem as not much more than an empty and obvious observation that if you are worn out, you need to get some rest and the best place to rest is with Jesus. But it is the second part of Jesus' invitation that makes this far less about Jesus providing comfort and more about Jesus offering us an example.

"Learn from me," Jesus says. "Put on my yoke... place my burden on your shoulders... and you will see how rich and joyful and meaningful life can be." "Learn from me," Jesus tells us. "My burden is only and always to answer to my Father in heaven... to do God's will."

"And the more you do God's will, Jesus tells us - the more you do what I tell you - the less your burden and heartache will be: the less trouble you will find yourself in; the less dead ends you will encounter; the less you will be tangled up in disordered desires."

"Learn from me," Jesus says to us. "Do what I have taught you." "Live each day according to God's Word and not only will your burdens be lighter and not only will your struggles in life and with yourself become less and less frequent, but you will begin to live more on faith and not by sight alone... You will begin to better understand what both the angel Gabriel promised Mary and what the Apostle Paul proclaimed to the church at Philippi, "With God, all things are possible."

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This evening, through the reading of passages of Scripture, we have been able to follow God's people in a faith journey. In Exodus 13, we see God lead a lost and frightened people into their first steps out of slavery

and into the wilderness with a pillar of a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. And notice that neither the cloud nor the fire ever leave the people. And God never leaves us.

In Exodus 20, we see God provide God's people with ten rules, Ten Commandments – rules that have become engraved on every faithful person's heart.

You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall not murder. You shall honor your father and your mother. We do these things... we follow these rules... we live according to the Word of God... not only because we think that we have to, not merely because subscribing to these rules makes us better people but also because we know in our hearts and through our own experiences that when we follow these rules, we feel better... our burden is lifted... These rules are good for us. The Ten Commandments are but one example of God's abiding, enduring, abundant grace.

God's Word is good for us. We are sick and lost and not ourselves when we turn away from God's Word. We are full of joy and at peace with God when we live according to God's Word.

When the people complained in the wilderness that they could never and would never find food, God gave the people the gift of manna and then warned the people to eat only what they needed for that day and to not hold any over for the next day, for the Lord would provide on the following day.

The people did not listen to God's Word – they disobeyed God's Word – and woke up to find that the manna that they were hiding and hoarding had turned rancid and foul.

Live according to God's Word and God will provide. Refuse to listen to God's Word, conclude that you do not need God's Word; and you will find yourself in trouble – lost, sick, and in need of God's amazing grace.

We heard tonight God speak through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 55 God speaks to us and says to us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts nor are God's ways ours.

God has a purpose for us – and that purpose is that we become happy, and holy and whole: that our fragmented lives are healed; that we are able to see genuine possibilities beyond our present circumstances, whatever those circumstances may be; that we begin to live as Mary lived, knowing that with God all things are possible... that we can begin as invisible, marginalized, powerless, nameless, fractured, injured, grieving, angry, desperate and doubting souls – and become rescued, redeemed, transformed by the life-changing Word of God.

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says these startling things to us: “The Word that comes from me will not return empty but shall accomplish what I meant for my Word to do: which is this: for us to be at peace; for us to live with joy; for us to act with purpose and with courage; for us to speak truth in love; for us to bear each other's burdens; and for us to love others - to love each other as Jesus loved us... as Jesus loves us.

The second section from Luke's Gospel that we heard this evening – the familiar passage from Luke 2 about the shepherds and their testimony, finds Mary “treasuring the words of the shepherds and pondering their

testimony in her heart.” She was still a young woman. She couldn’t find a decent place to have her baby. She hadn’t won the lottery and become suddenly rich. She wasn’t famous. In fact, she was an unknown.

But she had trusted in God. She lived according to God’s Word, and that made all the difference then at the time of Jesus’ birth and would continue to make all the difference all the way to the foot of the cross and then further to the empty tomb.

The simplest and best thing we can do tonight before we go home and wrap the last present and assemble those impossible to assemble toys is this: to promise ourselves, to pledge to each other, and to covenant with God that we will, from this moment on, live according to God’s Word.

It is when we make that commitment – it is when we let go of our own desires and live according to what God wants of us – then we will begin to know what it means to grow in grace... and to become what God wants all of us to become: happy, holy, and whole... led by faith... trusting in God and not in the whims or claims of humankind... empowered by hope... and led by love.

Tonight in your prayers, I invite you - **I encourage you** - to let God know your commitment in the way that Mary did when she first came face to face with the holy, saying “Let it be with me according to your Word.” Do that tonight; and it will be the best gift you have ever received. **Amen.**