

Date: December 20, 2020

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Title: GOD'S GIFT CHANGED THE WORLD

In our lesson for today, the angel Gabriel makes an announcement to the virgin Mary, that changed the world forever. Long ago, in a remote corner of this earth, God broke into our world through the voice of an angel named Gabriel. Gabriel came to a young woman named Mary.

As was the custom of the day, Mary's parents made all the arrangements for her marriage. At the proper age, she would marry Joseph the local carpenter. The negotiations were made between Mary's parents and Joseph's parents, with the couple having **NO** say, in the matter. Since Nazareth was a small village, Mary probably knew Joseph quite well. Then came the day, when Mary and Joseph were betrothed to each other. Betrothal, was a period of one year, and was as binding as marriage. It was so official that, during this year, if Joseph died, Mary would be considered a widow.

One day, as Mary was daydreaming about her marriage to Joseph, she looked up, and saw an angel standing before her. She was startled and frightened. Gabriel said to a frightened Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you," What an unusual way to begin. "You who are highly favored." Mary was just an ordinary girl, barely a teenager. There was nothing special about her, that we know of. She didn't come from a wealthy family. She wasn't listed in the society pages of the Nazareth times. No one outside of Nazareth, had ever heard of her. She was just your average young woman.

Mary was perplexed and confused. Gabriel sensed Mary's fear. He tried to comfort her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Mary didn't realize it at the time, but God had chosen her for a very special purpose. Gabriel said, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." Mary was dumbfounded. What could this all mean?

Mary listened to the angel's words. "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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Mary's response was one of bewilderment, particularly with her role in this amazing drama. She asked the divine messenger, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

Gabriel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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."

To satisfy her confusion about bearing a child, and yet being a virgin, Gabriel reminded her that her cousin, Elizabeth, was far past the child-bearing age, but she was six months pregnant. This was God's doing, the angel told her, for nothing is impossible with God.

That was all it took for Mary to be convinced. Mary answered, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Then Gabriel left her.

But Mary believed Gabriel's message. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Although we know very little about Mary and her family, we can assume that she was a devout Jewish girl, who had listened and believed the scripture lessons read at the local synagogue. Although she was certainly startled by the appearance of an angel, his words didn't seem foreign to her. Deep in her heart, she believed that one day the Messiah would come. She just never realized, that she would be chosen to play a part in the Messiah's birth.

It's a beautiful story. It's a sacred story to the 2.5 billion people on this earth who call themselves Christians. That's approximately 1 out of every 3 people on earth. What an amazing impact Mary's baby has had on the world. There are some elements to the story of the first Christmas that will live forever in our hearts.

First, we see a young woman's obedience to God. Mary answered, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word, to me, be fulfilled."

When a pastor asked a class of boys and girls, "Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?" a boy in the class raised his hand and replied, "Because his mother was there." That's true! Without Mary's obedience to God, the Christmas story, would be different. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Obedience, is the key to all doors."

I read recently about another remarkable young woman named Maria Dyer. Maria was born in 1837 on the mission field in China where her parents were missionaries. Both of her parents died when Maria was a little girl, and she was sent back to England, to be raised by an uncle.

Like her parents Maria felt a call to be a missionary. At age sixteen she, along with her sister, returned to China to work in a girl's school. Five years later, she married a well-known missionary named Hudson Taylor.

Life wasn't easy for Hudson and Maria Taylor. Their ministry was criticized severely. Of their nine children, only four survived to adulthood. Maria herself died of cholera when she was just forty-three. But she believed the cause was worthy of the sacrifice. On her grave marker these words were inscribed: "For her to live was Christ, and to die was gain."

Pastor Paul Chappell makes this comment about the Taylors' ministry, "In a day when many are self-absorbed, and care more about what they can get, rather than what they can give, we need a renewal of sacrificial love. It was God's love for us that sent Jesus into the world, to die for our sins, and it's that kind of giving love, that our world needs so greatly today. When we love God as we should, our interests fade as we magnify God."

That was true of Hudson and Maria Taylor. Without obedient servants like the Taylors, we would not have the Gospel today. Certainly without the obedience of a young woman named Mary, we wouldn't have the story of Christmas.

First, we see a young woman's obedience. **The second element that endears the Christmas story to us, is how God chose to work, to accomplish God's mission.** God chose to work through the least and the lowest of people and places, reminding us of our responsibilities to the least and lowest as well.

Many of the deprived and outcast of this world, identify in a special way with the Christ child, who lay in a feeding trough for a bed, and was attended by shepherds,

donkeys, and cattle. Everything about Christ's birth, affirms God's love for the least and the lowest.

Galilee, the region where Christ grew up, was up in the hills, and a bit backward compared with Judea.

Nazareth, the village that Mary and Joseph called home, had such a poor reputation that, in John 1:46, Nathaniel sums it up like this: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Now, Bethlehem was no teeming metropolis, but it was the city of David, and it was there that the Messiah was to be born. But, as cities go, there was nothing to recommend it. It was a small town, not too far from the holy city of Jerusalem.

Then there were the cattle and the shepherds and the bed of straw because there was no room for them in the inn. How absolutely astonishing, it would have been, to that humble first family of our faith, huddled in that crude stable, if they realized that the birth of the Christ child, would today become a celebration of extravagant materialistic indulgence. But, for those who remember, the first Christmas was aimed at the humblest of people, it's a reminder that, we who follow Jesus, have a responsibility for those for whom life is a constant struggle. And there are many who struggle in these difficult times.

But, it's amazing how Christmas brings out the generosity. And it should. Christmas began in a stable, surrounded by shepherds and animals, a humble young couple, and a babe in a manger.

First, we see a young woman's obedience. Secondly, we see how God chose the least and the lowest to accomplish God's plans, and it reminds us of our responsibilities to those who struggle to get by in life.

Finally, and most important, is the recognition that Christmas is the celebration of God's greatest gift to humanity, God's own Son. The tradition of giving gifts at Christmas time, is usually tied to the story of the Magi, giving gifts to baby Jesus. But, the far greater gift at Christmas time, is the gift of the baby Jesus himself. John writes, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son . . ." There's no greater gift than that.

You might remember the late Dave Thomas, founder and long-time CEO of the Wendy's fast food chain. Dave Thomas wrote a book in which he told about an incident out of his own experience.

Dave was scheduled to film a short television spot, urging people to consider adopting children. Dave himself had been adopted as a child. As a consequence, he urged others to consider adopting a child. He and a friend were to meet with a brother and sister, potential adoptees, to talk with them before they filmed the TV spot.

It was shortly before Christmas, but these two children had little hope of celebrating the holidays with a loving family. Dave hoped the TV spot would help. Unfortunately, the little girl had a problem that could not be hidden. She had an ugly scar across her face where she had been hit with a beer bottle by her father.

As they were talking with the children, the little boy blurted out, "I don't want to be adopted with her. Just look at her ugly scar!" The boy wanted a family, and he was

afraid his little sister's appearance, would scare away potential adoptive parents. Dave knew how important it was that the children be adopted together, but he was at a loss what to say.

Fortunately, his friend saved the day. He took two one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet, and gave one bill to each child. He told them that the money was for buying Christmas presents. He wanted them to go out and buy something very special. But there was a catch: they could only use the money to buy something for their sibling, something that would make their brother or their sister very happy. So, that was the condition: each child would only get the \$100 if he or she promised to spend it on the other. Then he asked them to write him a letter, telling him what they had bought.

The result of this experiment was beautiful. In the process of buying one another gifts, the children had bonded more strongly. The brother no longer rejected his little sister because of the scar. As a result, they were adopted together, and their adoptive parents remarked on how well the children took care of each other.

A gift given in the right spirit, can carry with it, a wondrous amount of love. That was God's intent, in the gift of His Son Jesus Christ. In the Christmas story, we see a young woman's obedience to God, we see God's love for the least and the lowest and, most important of all, we see God's love for each of us, as well as all the people on earth, through the gift of Jesus Christ our Savior. So, let's accept God's gift to us and all the world, by Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.