

Luke 1:26-38

4th Sunday in Advent

December 20, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ.

INI

We have conversations every day. Many of them are mundane. We'll talk about the weather, how our favorite team is doing, work, school, dinner plans, grocery lists, "honey do" lists, and the like. Most of them are very uneventful and forgettable. But there are some that stand out. There are some that are life-changing. We'll recall the last conversations with a loved one before their death. We'll remember the deep, heart-to-heart, soul-bearing discussions with a close friend or with a spouse. There is the build up to *the* question, recalling events of past months or years, before finally asking "will you marry me?" The wisdom in words offered that led to a career change, to pick a college, the decision to start a family, what to name the baby. These conversations stay with us and we couldn't forget them if we tried, because they changed and reshaped our lives.

The conversation we have before us today in our Gospel reading is one of those sorts of conversations—life-changing. It's between a young peasant girl from a small town and a mighty messenger from God, an angelic being. The fact that an angel is involved...that alone would make it pretty memorable. But the message was what was not just memorable, but life-changing. But at the same time, it is a bit awkward. In fact, if we had been there to witness it, parts of it might be painful to watch.

Have you ever had one of those life-changing conversations, but it was a near-miss? Perhaps you have some joyous news to share. You plan what words to say, how you are going to introduce the topic, build up the backstory (if necessary), and then unleash the excitement. But the recipient of the words doesn't match your joy. "I got a promotion at work!" spoken with enthusiasm is met by "hmm...good for you" in unaffected tone. Or "we have an announcement. Grandma and I have saved up for the past few years and we are taking the whole family to Hawaii!" and the teenagers respond with "oh man! I'm going to miss out on [whatever event is more socially acceptable to a teenager to attend to save face with his or her friends]."

There's a bit of that going on in our reading. In fact, it happens several times throughout scripture. In our OT reading this also sort of happens with King David. *"I'm in this big house. And my Lord, Yahweh, is in a mere tent. You know what I'm going to do, Nathan? I'm going to build Him a house too. It will be great. People will come from all over to see it and give Him the glory He deserves."* Nathan's response at first isn't too bad. **"Go, do all that is in your heart. God is with you."** It's not bursting with enthusiasm but at least it's encouraging. But then comes *God's response through Nathan*. *"You want to build Me a house?! Why? Have I ever asked for a house? I don't need one. I've been with you all this time without one. Thanks. But, no thanks. Let Me tell you what I will do. I will build you a house, one that will last forever."*

Of course, we know that God's promise in this near miss conversation would be fulfilled as David's son, Solomon built the temple of the Lord. But Solomon's reign would come to an end. The temple would be destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed and rebuilt. But there would be a greater temple, a greater Son of David who would come later. And that is the topic of this life-changing conversation we get to sort of eavesdrop on this morning. The conversation is so familiar to us that we need to stop and really look at it to see the near-miss.

Imagine Gabriel in whatever version of angel you picture in your mind, but keeping in mind that Gabriel means "mighty man of God." And remember that he is one of only two named angels in scripture. He is important. He is impressive. He is powerful and awe-inspiring, a wonder to behold. And...he is excited. 1 Peter 1:12 tells us that even the angels have longed to look upon and understand this salvation plan for mankind. Gabriel has been waiting a long time to get the command from the Almighty to announce this. You can almost imagine the longing conversation extended throughout the millennia.

"Is it time yet, Lord?!"

"Not yet."

"May I go yet, O Almighty One?"

"A few hundred more years, Gabriel."

"How about now? May I proclaim something, pretty please, O Lord of Hosts?"

"Yes, Gabriel. Now is the fulness of time. You may go. Here is what you'll say..."

And the time comes and we sometimes hear or read Gabriel's words in a monotone voice: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But we should hear and read it with enthusiasm. **"Rejoice, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"** (And he does say "rejoice." "Greetings" is a pretty weak translation.)

And then the near-miss, the reaction isn't excitement, but confusion from Mary, **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"**

But Gabriel is not deterred because he's not done with his message. It's an eternal message. It's a life-changing message, and not just for Mary but for all who hear and believe. **"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 called holy—the Son of God."**

And then, not a near miss, but the exact reaction that Gabriel hoped for, that the Most High knew would come, an amazing reaction: Mary believed. **"Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."** And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. A new house was built from the house of David, a new and eternal Kingdom was in the Son of David, whom David would call Lord. And this temple would be destroyed also, but in three days it would be rebuilt.

And this is the message that we celebrate in just a few days, the birth and the death and the resurrection that we celebrate, and the return that we anticipate because we have been brought into this conversation too. It's not just a life-changing conversation for Mary, but for you and me too. Christ was born for the forgiveness of sins just as much as He died and rose for the forgiveness of sins, of your sins, of my sins.

And yet...sometimes...there is still a near miss. We hear the good news and we can also think, *"how will this be, since I am a sinner...since I still struggle...since I desire to lead a holy life, but cannot? I still find it hard to dedicate time to God's Word, I still covet. I still lust after people or images. I still gossip. I still resent my neighbors for their possessions. I still hate some rather than loving even my enemies. How will this be, Lord, when my sin is ever before me, especially that one?"*

But God is not done with His message. He is not deterred. He continues to proclaim it to you through His messengers. Maybe not through angelic, heavenly beings, but through ministers of the Gospel, pastors, brothers and sisters in Christ, devotional books, His written Word. And He continues to proclaim *"Rejoice, O favored one" to you. "Rejoice, for I have taken your sin. I have become your sin. I have gone to my grave with it and left it there. Rejoice, O favored one, you are Mine and no one can snatch you out of my hands. Rejoice, O favored one, for I AM with you. I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not all that different from Mary. She was favored, yes, but not because of anything she had done. She was favored because God had chosen her. You are also favored, and not because of anything you have done either, but because God has chosen you in Christ for salvation. This is your conversation. It is ongoing. It is life-changing. It is eternal-life-changing. And with hearts that believe, we join in with Mary's words, "Behold, we are servants of the Lord; let it be to us according to His Word." And so it is. And so it will be.

Rejoice, O favored ones. The Lord is with you now and forever. Amen.