

**Sermon Draft December 24, 2023 (Morning)**

**Text: Luke 1:26–38**

**Sermon: “God’s Plan”**

I imagine we all have our favorite seasons in the church calendar. Advent is one my favorites. I enjoy the hymns; I like the royal colors in the banners and paraments. And I love the Advent wreath, with the candles being lit Sunday after Sunday, showing that Christmas is getting closer and closer. The excitement and expectations increase because we know that Christmas is right around the corner—and with Christmas come gifts and many surprises!

I remember as a child counting the days until Christmas morning. I couldn’t wait to be surprised by the Christmas gifts that were under the tree in our home. However, as I grew and got older, I realized that Christmas’s surprises are not only under the tree but in people’s lives too! In fact, God’s surprises started to happen even before the first Christmas day. They started to happen in the lives of simple people, regular people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and, this morning, we see them happening in the life of a young girl named Mary!

There she was, living in Nazareth, a little town in Galilee. Her mind was already set on the wedding, as she was pledged to marry a man named Joseph.

I think some of you ladies can relate especially if you planned a wedding. Mary is probably thinking about what she will wear, about the guests that will be invited to the wedding, about family members who will come from far and near. Oh, and of course there's Joseph; I'm sure he's in her thoughts too.

Everything seems to be going according to plan, and everyone is excited about the great day of the wedding! Mary couldn't wait to see it with her own eyes. But now this angel shows up with something unexpected, something that was not planned, something startling! An angel named Gabriel says to Mary, "***Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!***" (v 28).

Now, try to be in Mary's shoes for a minute. How would you respond to a greeting like that? "An angel? Coming to my little town and telling me that I am favored? What is this all about? What does he mean by this greeting?"

Luke describes Mary’s reaction in this way ***“She was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be”*** (v 29).

Of course, Mary would be troubled. Who wouldn’t be? It’s interesting—the original Greek word used by Luke here to describe Mary’s feelings means she debated, considered, reasoned about the angel’s greeting. “Why am I favored?

Me? Who am I? What does it mean that the Lord is with me?”

You see, Mary knows her place. She knows who she is. This should not be happening! She is only a teenager, a young girl, with no status or socioeconomic influence. “No, this angel surely has the wrong address!”

But the angel goes on to give more details about his mission to Nazareth. Gabriel says, ***“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”*** (vs 30–33).

Can you imagine what's going on in Mary's head? She's probably thinking, "I'm not married yet, and you're already telling me that I'll have a baby! This means trouble! Don't you know that, Gabriel? Can you please tell me something else?"

As I said before, some Christmas surprises are not under the tree, but they are—and they happen—in people's lives. And now, Mary's life is upside down! She knows exactly what will happen to her if she's found to be pregnant before her wedding. "No, Mr. Gabriel, this is not a good idea. Could you please go to another town and find someone else to deliver this message to?"

Getting such surprises when we've been making plans can be very disconcerting. Here we are at Christmas Eve, and we're still busy with our plans. In fact, we started to get busy right after Thanksgiving, right? By then, we had our long to-do list ready to go, shopping for the Christmas gifts, decorating the house, putting out the Christmas lights, mailing cards, planning our Christmas party, and on and on. To have such a surprise at the last minute, as did Mary, would be very troubling.

I can imagine her thinking, “Lord, I already have other plans. I have my own schedule, and I have my own things to take care of. Can you please send your angel to another town, to another place, to deliver your message of good news and hope?”

Can you see yourself saying something like that? We certainly are not much different from Mary, are we? No, we have the same reactions, the same kind of responses: “Mr. Angel, can you go away?”

But as Advent reminds us, the Lord is coming, and he is coming for you! He is coming to impact your life, and it will never be the same again. His name is Jesus, and Jesus saves! Jesus is not a regular baby; yes, he is Mary’s son in the flesh, but he is also the Son of the Most High; he is the Son of God. Jesus is coming, and he is coming to save! As Helmut Thielicke liked to say, “**The crib and the cross are of the same wood**” (John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross* [St. Louis: CPH, 2013], 43). The reason Jesus is coming is to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10) and die for sinners, die for us! (Matthew 1:21).

But Gabriel listens to Mary’s reply, ***“How can this be? I’m a virgin, and I’m not married yet”*** (v 34). Mary is not being a skeptic when she asks, “How can this be?” Differently from Zechariah, who didn’t believe Gabriel when he heard that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child in her old age (1:18–20), Mary is asking for clarification. How would that be possible? Mary knew that she had never slept with a man!

And after Gabriel listens to Mary, he says, ***“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 behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God”*** (vs 35–37).

Gabriel’s words to Mary not only describe what will happen but at the same time offer comfort and assurance to a young bride who just learned she would be pregnant without being married. To paraphrase the angel’s message: “Mary, what’s about to happen in your life is something out of this world. God the Holy Spirit will come upon you. He will overshadow you with the power of the Most High.

He will fill you with his glorious presence and blessing [Ex 40:34–35], and you will conceive the Son of God. You see, Elizabeth, your relative, the one that everyone said was too old to have a baby, guess what! She's pregnant, and in her sixth month! Mary, as it was with Elizabeth, so it will also be with you! Remember, nothing is impossible with God! God is faithful and keeps his promises. He always does what he says he'll do! For God, nothing is impossible!"

When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives through the Good News of the Gospel, he makes the impossible possible! He transforms us; he changes us from the inside out; he gives us faith; and he makes God's plan of salvation happen in our lives too.

Martin Luther once said that both the devil and God came close to us. The difference is that the devil came close to harm us. However, in Jesus, God came closer to save us.

Mary had other plans; she was not ready to be the mother of Jesus. Her heart was ready for a wedding. That was her plan, but God had his plan too. And God's plan is always better!

Mary realizes the magnitude of the message that Gabriel delivered to her, and she responds: ***“I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”*** (v 38). Moved by the word she heard from Gabriel, Mary responds in total trust and submission to God’s will. She understands that everything is in God’s hand, and he is in control. Mary knows that God’s plan is much better. She is favored; the Lord is with her; there is no reason now to be afraid. Trusting in God’s Word of promise, Mary is now willing to become his servant. It’s all about God’s plan.

Here we are! Today is Christmas Eve, and, with Mary, we are reminded that Christmas has surprises. These are not just surprises in packages under the tree, but surprises that happen in people’s lives too. Mary’s surprise also reminds us that God’s plan is always better than our plans. Christ is coming, and he will come again. It doesn’t matter how busy we may be with our personal plans. Like Mary, our hearts may not be ready, but God is gracious.

The Holy Spirit comes to us, opening our ears so we can listen to God's Word of promise and leading us to trust not in our plan but in God's: Jesus, the Son of God, is coming to save the world! God's plan, Jesus, His son, coming to save the world is better than ours. He is coming to save you and me. This is all about God's plan, and his plan certainly is always better.

Amen