

Gospel lesson

Today we hear a traditional Advent story from Luke.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/qnpi-003-birth-announcement/>

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

³²He 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 ancestor David.

³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn "To a Maid Engaged to Joseph" UMH #215 vv.1,4-6>

<Mary portrayal>



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/mary-angel/>;
credit: LUMO

Hello. I am Mary, wife of Joseph the carpenter, of Nazareth. As you can see, I am with child – the first in our family. I know what people are saying, that we have not been married that long, but it's not what they think. I am actually still a virgin.

Oh don't make faces at me; it is true, and I am loved. I'll tell you what happened.

It is a bit nerve-racking, being of marriageable age and having arrangements made for you to marry someone you may not know well. I was alone, praying for a love-filled life and the ability to make a happy home, when suddenly an amazing figure appeared, so bright it was kind of frightening.

It told me not to be afraid, that I was to be blessed - with the birth of a son! I wondered how this was possible, what with me being a virgin and all. The messenger told me the **Holy Spirit** would make me pregnant - that this child was from God!!

I might have hesitated to believe it, but my elderly relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth were expecting a child - their first - after a visit from an angel in the temple. So I had faith in what God's messenger told me, and offered my service to the Lord.

I was so excited by the experience that I immediately told my family. My parents were less happy, at first; I do not think they really believed me. Since I had talked about Elizabeth and Zechariah, they sent me off to stay there, to see what I was getting into and to see how the expectant parents reacted to my news.

Elizabeth was overjoyed to see me, going on about how John - that's their son, now - was excited to see me, that she knew from his reaction in her womb that I too was blessed by God. She invited me into their warm, loving home - it was good to feel so welcome and useful! Especially with Zechariah unable to speak, she appreciated my company.

I spent three months helping Elizabeth the best that I could, and learned a lot about what to expect in pregnancy, childbirth, and dealing with a newborn baby. It got me excited and nervous for my own child!

My parents came to see Elizabeth and Zechariah after John was born, staying for his circumcision. God's hand at work was shown when Zechariah started speaking again, praising God. What a wonderful miracle to see!

Afterward, my parents headed home, taking me with them. I was engaged to Joseph and spoke with him about my being pregnant - but he had not seen the miracle of John's birth and Zechariah's speaking.

Joseph was angry, not believing that an angel visited me even though the whole town was abuzz with the truth about Zechariah's angel. Given all that was going on, Joseph said he would break off the engagement quietly rather than raise a fuss.

I cried that night, I can tell you, to think that I was unwanted. I resolved that my child would always know that he was loved and wanted, at least by me, no matter what the world threw at us. I prayed to Yehovah for help in serving Him.

Then Joseph was visited by an angel too! He changed his mind and believed me, believed the truth; he finally trusted me. And so, our wedding went ahead after all. It was a happy celebration, but we have not consummated it yet; we are waiting for that until after Jesus is born. Yes, that will be His name, Jesus - God's messenger told me that.

Not too long after getting married, we got word of a royal census. Those awful Romans have to make sure they know about everybody so they can take as much as possible from us. They say they use the money to build roads and things, but all the roads around here are packed dirt from traffic moving along them.

Well, maybe I will get to see a Roman road, because we have to go all the way to Bethlehem to register for the census. Joseph is of the line of King David, you know, and so we have to go to the city where those family records are kept.

It will be a long journey. Our families usually planned for a week of walking when heading to Jerusalem for festivals, but Joseph does not want me

too stressed, so we will be taking it extra slowly.

We are almost ready to leave, and I think we should make it there in time to find a suitable place for me to give birth. I like to think God's child will be born in the city of David; after all, he is to be king over all of the house of Jacob, like David was.

If all goes well, we will have his circumcision done in the temple in Jerusalem, with a lot of his extended family in attendance because of the census.

<chuckling> Preparing for this expedition as just two of us but expecting to return with a baby makes me think of how the animals got onto Noah's ark by twos and came off with - well, more than just two.

It is funny, the life journey this is.

- † I started full of **hope**, prayed in faith, and was blessed by God with a child-to-be to love.
- † Turmoil arose from misunderstandings, but I stayed faithful to God and was blessed with a **peaceful** outcome, the trust of Joseph, and the opportunity to build a loving home together.
- † I saw the **joy** of childbirth with Elizabeth and Zechariah, and although nervous about what my being pregnant meant for us, I stayed faithful to God and was blessed to be received with **joy** into a new family.

† Because Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah and I all stayed faithful to God, our lives are blessed with new life and **love**.

We might never have known these if we had not been open to the transforming power of God. And most awesome of all, the transformation brought about by God's love is just the first step toward the endless possibilities before us now. *Er-kahm-ka na A-do-nai!*¹

Message: Love that Transforms Us



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Beloved God,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may be transformed by Your love and learn how to bring Your transforming grace to the world. Amen.

We look now at "Love that Transforms Us" in our Advent series "Our Spirit Waits."

"Like the previous three weeks, [today] invites us

¹ Translates as "We will love you O Lord" as taken from UMH #123, "El Shaddai"

to shake up our understandings of love, to dig in on this transformative love that we receive and give and wait for. What does this love do in us? How will we know it is here?"

When I have my granddaughter in my arms, I just want to express to her how much I love her. Often I sing to her one of several songs that I suspect she will come to think of as "Grandma songs."

She brightens our days, so the old song "You Are My Sunshine" seemed like a natural song to sing.

<sing "You Are My Sunshine" - original wording:

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

You make me happy when skies are gray.

You'll never know, dear, how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away!>

The thing that struck me is, that song is very focused on what the singer wants for him/herself. It is all "my," not "our," and sounds kind of possessive, almost stalkerish. The singer presumes [to tell the person what they will or will not know] and [makes a demand at the end implying they want possession of the object of the song].

Most people see nothing wrong with the song because there are many situations where it is appropriate, when applied to committed relationships of equals. But for a child? Someday they will need to be on

their own, and (assuming the parents are doing a decent job raising the child), it may be a bit much for a grandparent to insist on having the child all the time.

Possession is not characteristic of healthy love in a balanced relationship, yet people tend toward it when their desire to cling tightly in love goes to an extreme.

We see it in people clinging to an excess of things they like rather than sharing with those who have less. Mary sang about how God restores healthy balance, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty.

We see that possessive tendency in the Old Testament with David wanting to build a temple for God to live in. God basically came back saying “You cannot contain Me, but I will stay with you and continue to nurture you and our relationship.”

When we realize how awesome and amazing God is, we may want to put God in a box, to be in control so that we never lose the amazing gift of God’s love. But we cannot keep love that way. True love is freely given, not forced. That is why we have a choice about whether to love God or to sin. We can trust God to love us; that trust is the basis of our faith.

Mary had faith enough in God to accept the offered blessing of Jesus. She had preconceptions [about the way things worked] so she was confused by the angel's announcement, but she trusted God enough to put aside those preconceptions and let her life be transformed by God's love.

We are called similarly: to put aside preconceptions of how the world works and look for healthier alternatives, things made possible through God's transforming love.

I spoke last week about a little girl full of life in a doctor's waiting room. Talking to strangers is a no-no in society, but under the mother's watchful eye, we were able to play and sing. Those who know me know that I change song lyrics to fit situations; at the end when she hugged me, I sang this to her:

<sing "You Are My Sunshine" - alternate wording

You are **our** sunshine, **our little** sunshine.

You make **us** happy when skies are gray.

You **may not** know, dear, how much **we** love you.

We're so glad you could be here today!>

I think that affirmed both her and her mother without making them feel entrapped in any way, and I hope they further share God's affirming love with others.

Some people have preconceptions that you cannot talk about God in school. This past week, I substituted for a teacher at the school. It was near the end of

the period when a student, perhaps noticing my cross earrings, asked if I was a Christian. I of course said yes; another student brought out that I am a pastor. Suddenly a series of questions ensued about why I believe in God, if I believe in heaven and hell, how I feel about gays - some basic faith questions.

I did not start the conversation, but I tried to answer as best as I could, hoping God would work through me. I did not tell them what **they must** believe, only what I believe and why. I want to empower them to think and to let God's love do the transforming work. I want to empower you to think and to be agents of God's transforming love.

So like Mary did, let go of preconceptions about how life must be and welcome the opportunities God brings us, to serve and to share God's love - and to be transformed in doing so. Look for new possibilities and sing praises to the Lord for them, that all may know the Holy Spirit is at work in this world.

Let God's love work through you to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

<Doxology>

<Offertory / Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

Gracious and Generous God: We offer our gifts to you, knowing that the energy exerted in our giving is tiny compared to what we've expended finding the gifts for our families and friends.

You have given us a glimpse of the gift you truly seek in the angel's conversation with Mary: when told that she would give birth to our savior, she simply said, "Yes, let it be according to your word."

May that affirmation of faith and obedience be the gift we offer this day.

(above prayer from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)

ancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2023.