

Advent 4B, December 24, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

You are truly blessed this morning. Worshiping here this morning. In this beautiful church. Singing these wonderful hymns. Among these imperfect, forgiven and faithful disciples. All blessings given to us by God. And for them we are truly thankful.

But that's not all. You are blessed by hearing God's Word. Hearing the Word of God as it came to his servant and disciple Mary. God speaks to Mary through the angel Gabriel. That's what angels are; messengers from God. God tells Mary what he's going to do for her; how she has been chosen to be the birth mother of Israel's Messiah, a child conceived not by human power but by the power of God's Holy Spirit. You are truly blessed for hearing this story today.

You are blessed by this story for a number of reasons. First, because it makes the Christmas story that much more complete. In a few short hours we'll celebrate Christmas. Many will pause their lives, gather with family or here at church and remember much of the story. Some will focus on the lights and the gifts, the joy and merriment of the holiday. Some will remember the birth of a tender baby and the serenity of a star-lit night. Others will recall angels and shepherds and the gifts of Wise Men guided by a mysterious star. But you are blessed by being here ahead of time, and hearing who and why all these things are to take place. You hear the promise made by God to King David of Israel that this child will be descended from his family, and how this makes him a great king whose kingdom will never end. Jesus is for everyone, yes, but he is for us through a people, Israel, and a promise God made long before Jesus was born. This story of Gabriel announcing to Mary she will give birth to a king in David's line reminds us that God's promises are always fulfilled, no matter how long it may seem to take. God will always remain faithful to his own promises. That is a word of blessing.

Second, this story blesses us because we hear Mary's response to God's Word. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word." After hearing this amazing and even perplexing announcement, Mary trusts the promises God makes. Martin Luther says Mary's trust in God is the greatest miracle of all. Mary believed God and took him at his Word. Without trusting God none of what follows would have, or could have, happened in the way it did. The real blessing here is that we are privileged to hear how and in what manner the first follower of Jesus responds. For that is what Mary is: she's the first to hear the Word concerning Jesus and believe it and trust it. Mary becomes the model disciple for all who come after her. Her willingness to go where God wants to take her is a blessing to us this morning. For God speaks to us, and leads us in paths of discipleship, and Mary is right there as our model and our guide, trusting God with her whole life.

There remains one more way this story blesses us today, and why I'm glad you're here to hear it. Because Mary was first blessed by God. The very first word spoken to her by God through the angel: "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you," are words of blessing. God chose Mary. The words, "favored one" mean "especially graced, or especially blessed." They give rise to the beginning of the prayer used by Roman Catholics, "Hail Mary, full of grace..." However the words are translated, the meaning is the same. Mary is blessed by God. This all happens first. Before God tells her what's going to happen with her. Before she has a chance to respond to God's word. Mary, the first disciple and follower of Jesus is blessed by God.

That's why you are blessed to be here this morning. To hear that blessing always comes before response. Grace always comes before faith. The love of God is already at work in your life before you apprehend it, or know about it or believe it. God takes notice of you, long before you start to notice the work of God in your life. And not just here on Sunday mornings, where I

will venture to say most of feel we are noticed and blessed. But each day of the week, Monday through Saturday, in the mundane and ordinary events of work and school, family and home, times of solitude or being social. God has you in his eye. He favors you. He calls to you in words of gentle and grace-filled greeting. And he is with you each day.

Imagine what your life would be like all week if you remembered and realized you are blessed by God. How you might see yourself, like Mary, as God's servant, open to the possibilities God places into your care. Mary gave birth to the Messiah, the Son of God, the world's savior. Mary was blessed by God. And Mary shared that blessing for the whole world. For your sake and for mine.

The birth we celebrate took place a long time ago. Yet Jesus is born into our world each and every day. Through us. We are, as blessed Martin Luther says, bearers of Christ to the world as well. We share Jesus with the world, as Mary did. Wherever we sow peace, whenever we offer forgiveness, when we share ourselves with those in need, Christ is born in the world again. That's the real meaning of Christmas. Jesus is born into the world anew, every day, through us. We carry within us, in our lives, our actions, our words, the Messiah, the world's savior. So, where you go this week, whatever you do, you will be blessed by God so that you may also be a blessing to others, bearing Christ within you. Amen.