

Sermon – December 20, 2020
“He will be called Son of God”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we work with your son here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning everyone! Welcome to the fourth Sunday in Advent. I hope that your to-do list for Christmas is getting very short. Let's take a minute to celebrate some of the happenings for our church this past week. The Fairfield's Bible study continues to meet and to explore the idea of covenant relationships. I would like to thank the Fairfield's congregation contact and prayer group for taking time to call people during this busy season. We were blessed to have a time of prayer for the needs we found over the last two weeks in our congregation. Last Sunday, we had the Pandemics come and play at Fairfield's and were greatly blessed by their musical talents. The Fairfield's leadership met and approved the 2021 budget, so we are ready to move forward into a new year of ministry. Hopefully, your ears can detect that we upgraded the sound system at Fairfield's a bit. Our hope is that you will be able to have a better worship experience. I think a group met yesterday and prepared love baskets for those in our community and congregation. And the beautiful Christmas decorations just keep growing in the church. Thanks to everyone who is helping.

The Bible study at Afton continues to work its way through the Gospel of John. We were able to deliver gifts to Angel Tree kids in Northumberland and Lancaster this week. The UMW also met, put together fruit baskets, and delivered them this past week to people in our congregations and community. Afton is looking a lot like Christmas with all of the decorations and a new sign. I believe that Sunday school is continuing to meet and that people who participate are receiving a great blessing. And finally, we went to several homes last Sunday afternoon and sang Christmas carols. There just never seems to be enough time when we go out caroling to get to all of the homes where we would like to share the gift of song.

This past week is the season on the historic church calendar when the focus is on the role Mary was given in God's plan for salvation. As a Protestant, I do struggle a bit with how Mary has been treated in the history of the larger church and how I am to relate to her as a Christ-follower. Let's look at this text from Luke this morning and see how Luke presents Mary in the third Gospel. As we look into these words, we should keep in mind that months ago in scripture time, Zechariah encountered the angel Gabriel in the temple at Jerusalem, and Elizabeth, his wife, is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy, as foretold by the angel in that encounter. We also need to keep in mind that the accounts of these mothers in Luke's Gospel are connected and intertwined as will be the lives of their sons.

Luke starts by letting us know we are not in the temple where Zachariah was when he encountered the angel Gabriel, but we now find ourselves in Nazareth. Nazareth is a sleepy, small village far north of Jerusalem. It is in the middle of nowhere in Israel, a small town of no significance. There is no expectation of anything great coming from this little village.

Throughout Luke's description of Mary, we should keep in mind that God is the primary actor. God is the one who recognizes the time has arrived to act. God is the one who selects the place and the people to interact with for His salvation plan. God is the one who sends His angel. God is moving His salvation plan forward and is now working to engage people who will cooperate with Him to accomplish His plan. Just as God alone knows the time of the second coming of Christ, it is God who recognizes the time for the birth of Christ and acts to bring it about. The moment has arrived and God continues to carry out His plan.

Luke tells us that the name of the angel who comes to Mary is Gabriel. Gabriel's name means divine warrior. This is no minor league angel, if there is such an angel. This is God's divine warrior sent to this sleepy town. Notice how far into this account we get before we meet Mary and how little information there is about her in Luke's Gospel. First, we learn that she is a virgin (a young, unmarried woman, twelve years old or older) engaged to Joseph who is of the House of David. It seems odd in this encounter between Mary and an angel to start with Joseph. Luke seems to be making the point that a child born in Joseph's family would be in the line of David. The child would have David as an ancestor and could fulfill the prophecy that the prophet Nathaniel received, that one in the house of David would always sit on David's throne. Joseph's son would be in the line of David and could be a king. Notice at this point we know more about Joseph than Mary. We are only told Mary's name and that she is a virgin. We are not given any information about her parents, how she was born, who her parents are, nothing about what she

does, what she cares about, nothing about who she is, or even what she is doing in this small farming town. We are not told where she is in the village or what she was engaged in when the angel arrives. Nor are we told anything about her relationship with God. Luke only shares with us that she is a woman engaged but not married, one who is a virgin so there is no chance that her child would have a confused lineage. Luke shares nothing significant in her life that would lead us to the conclusion that God should choose her for a central role in His plan for salvation. There are many virgins in Israel at this time, and we are left with the question of why the angel comes to Mary. Why does God choose her?

The angel appears, addresses her, and everything begins to change in Mary's life. "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you" What kind of a greeting is this? Why is she favored? Why is the Lord with her? Now, if a divine warrior were ever to show up where I was, I don't think I would respond well. I am very impressed that Mary is only perplexed. And based on the angel's response to her, I think there is a lot of fear growing within her in the presence of this angel. My assumption is there is also a lot of peace associated with the appearance of an angel. Fear is the response of people throughout the Bible when an angel appears to them, and Mary seems to respond in that manner, as the angel tells her not to be afraid. The other response we will see from Mary is that she will keep this and other events throughout her life in her heart and ponder them. She will turn them over, hold them up to the Lord, and seek to understand what is happening in the light of the steadfast love of God. While Mary is pondering the greeting, the angel continues to speak. Mary is told again that she is favored by God. We should notice that the source of the favor is God and not God's response to something Mary has done. This is God's grace being extended to Mary. Grace is extended by God to invite Mary into the story of salvation of all people in a significant manner. God does not choose Mary on the basis of any merit we are aware of. Instead, God has identified the time, place, and person to work through for the next step in His plan for salvation. This divine warrior then explains to Mary what it means for her to receive God's favor. She will conceive, bear a son, and name him Jesus. Her son will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give to her son the throne of his ancestor David. And her son will reign over the house of Jacob. The house of Jacob represents all of Israel and all those adopted into the covenant God made with Abraham. There will be no end to her son's kingdom in time and space. That is what the angel means by favor. She will be the mother of a child who will grow to be great in this manner. This is the favor of God that is being extended to Mary. Mary listens to the angel's words and processes this great

good news. The angel does not explain what all of these ideas and names mean. We will need to read the rest of the Gospel of Luke to understand what it will mean for Jesus to fulfill the words the angel speaks to Mary. And as I contemplate these words and the names and roles for Jesus, I struggle to grasp who this baby will be. As I struggle with these ideas, I wonder how a young woman from a little village far from Jerusalem heard these words. Great? Son of the Most High? Given David's throne, reign over Israel, no end to his kingdom? How do we hear these words in light of all we know about Jesus? We ask as Mary pondered, "Who is Jesus?"

Mary's response to the angel's words is a summary of her struggle to understand what she is being told. In one sense, her response is as simple as asking how could she have a child as she is not yet married. Mary may be thinking that what the angel is telling her is that she and Joseph will have a son who will grow to be all of these things in Israel. Joseph is in the line of David, so their child would have the correct lineage. Mary may be thinking the angel's words speak to that possibility. She may also simply be wondering what will happen to her if what the angel is saying occurs. Her question to the angel seems to accept that God could do all of this, could make a way to raise up a child who would fulfill all of these things, but what does that mean for her?

The angel responds to her question and tells her how these things will occur. Gabriel tells Mary the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her and she will conceive a child. The child will be holy and will be the Son of God. This all has a mysterious, unbelievable ring to it. This seems to be a moment in time when God will create something new within Mary, the Son of God. And then to confirm for her that the mystery she will live out in her body and life will occur, the angel gives her a sign. The sign is that Elizabeth, who is Mary's relative and was barren, has been pregnant for six months and will also bear a son. With the giving of the sign, we also gain a key insight into who Mary is that we did not have. We learn that Mary is in the lineage of Levi as she is related to Elizabeth who is in the line of Levi, the tribe of the priests of Israel. With Mary as the mother of Jesus, and Joseph as his perceived or adopted father, Jesus is able to be not only a king, but a priest. Her son, the Son of God will have authority over all people and will intercede for them before God. Nothing is impossible with God. God can work with Elizabeth and Zechariah and bring forth a son, John, in Elizabeth's old age from a barren womb. God can work through the Holy Spirit to bring forth a son through Mary to be Lord of Lords, King of Kings, son of man and Son of God. Nothing is impossible for God. God is the creator and is creating something new through Mary.

Upon hearing this news from the angel, Mary makes a decision and responds with “Behold! Here am I.” We should catch echoes of Abraham’s words to God as God calls him to sacrifice Isaac. We should catch echoes of Samuel as he opens his ears to hear God speak to him. We should catch an echo of Isaiah as he cries out that he is a man of unclean lips, and then, when his sin is burned away, he cries out, “Here am I, send me.” This is the cry from across the ages when the people of God have been caught up or invited into the vision of God for salvation of His people and agreed to cooperate with God in His plan for redemption for all people. Mary replies that she is the bond servant of the Lord. She will trust this master and serve in any way she can. She replies, let it be with me according to your word, according to the word of God, and, with her response, the angel leaves Mary. God has picked the time, the place, and the woman to work with Him to bring forth the Son of God. And that woman has agreed to cooperate with God. We should just dwell in this word for a moment and let sink into our minds what Mary has just agreed to do. She has agreed to be the mother of the Son of God. And she is alone now, alone in the world, with the Son of God growing in her womb. Can we grasp that? God has called for a servant to risk everything she knew to become part of His plan for salvation of the world, and Mary said yes. Think about that for just a moment. Think about what it means for her to say yes to God. I am not sure how to put what has just happened in the scripture into words. Mary said yes and salvation takes on flesh as an unborn child. This new life in Mary’s womb is the Son of God. This is one of the key ideas that separates Christianity from all other religions. Other religions have words of wisdom but they are only words. We, as Christians, have words and the Word made flesh, a child, God in the flesh, who will become the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and who will be resurrected and seated at the right hand of God to intercede for us. God in his steadfast love acts through people to bring about salvation. Here in this incredible moment is a virgin in the distant town of Nazareth at the end of the kingdom of Israel, far away from the temple, who says yes to God. Her name is Mary, a virgin, engaged to Joseph. And she says yes to God’s favor. This is why Mary will be called blessed by all generations. Stop for a moment sometime this week and look at a manger scene you encounter and think about what Mary did for us and then call her blessed.

Before we leave Mary this morning, let’s see what we can learn from her. First, even though we may think we are nothing, living in a place farther away than nowhere, of no importance and insignificant, we need to let Mary’s response to God remind us that when God calls us, we can become part of someone’s salvation story. If we will say yes to God’s call in our

lives, trust God, and be willing to risk everything, God can use us as vessels that have Jesus living within them to bring the good news of salvation to another person. We may feel unprepared and too busy with our activities of life, but if we will listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and make ourselves available, God can and will do great things through us. We may feel insignificant, but when God calls us, we can become someone God can cooperate with in someone's salvation story. Next, we need to learn to live in a manner that honors God. We need to let Jesus Christ transform us into a people who are growing into his image and living in a manner that honors God. We may not see what God is doing, but if we are open to God's call and will submit to be used by Him, God can recreate and transform others through us. Finally, (not final in what we can learn from Mary, but what we will look at this morning), we have to be willing to set aside our plans, our goals, and our desires, and trust God. God will provide, give us words to speak, power to go, courage to stand, and provisions for the journey if we will trust Him. Mary does that, risking everything, her marriage, her home, her reputation in her town, her friends, even her very life. She could have held on to what she had and passed on God's favor and lived a quite simple life in the tiny village of Nazareth, but she chose to cooperate with and trust God. God still acts today to bring salvation to the lost through people who will cooperate with Him. We need to seek to be open to the coming of God in our lives and be ready to say, "Yes, here I am, a bond servant of the Lord." Mary may seem to have been taking great risk with all that was planned in her life, a comfortable house built by a carpenter, a family and the security of life in a distant, predictable village. But when God called, she listened, made a decision to cooperate with God, and replied, "Behold, here I am, the bond servant of the Lord." May we learn to do the same in our lives.

Pray with me: Father, we are reluctant to surrender all and trust in you. Yet, Lord, you have called, we have heard your voice, we have seen the gift of a child who is the Son of God. Lord, we are afraid to trust you. Send us your grace and your peace. Lord, help us to hear your request for us that we may decide to cooperate with you and say yes to your call in our lives, trust in you, and become part of your plan to bring salvation to one who does not yet know your steadfast love. Holy Spirit, come and guide us, come and transform us, that we might always be ready to say, "Here I am, the bondservant of the Lord" in answer to your call in our lives. Amen