

Sermon – December 24, 2023  
“As on the day of Midian”  
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 open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out into fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning and welcome to the day before Christmas, the day before we celebrate the coming of God in the flesh, the day before our anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, God’s anointed one, ends with Jesus’ arrival and we begin to walk with him as he grows from a baby in a manger to the one who fulfills the year of the Lord’s favor. Today is the last day of Advent and now we move into the Christmas season. There are twelve days of Christmas. Don’t stop singing the songs of the Christmas season the day after Christmas. Sing them for twelve days or even all year long. Enjoy fully a time of celebrating the coming of Jesus as a child and look for Jesus’ return. Our cry in the Christmas season continues to be, “Come, thou long expected Jesus.”

This morning's sermon is going to be participatory. That means we all have a role. Your role is to listen and when you hear me say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord," you respond with "let it be with me according to your word." I had those words put up on the screen to help us remember what we are to say. These are the words Mary speaks to the angel Gabriel when he comes to her to bring to her the Lord's favor. Okay, let's practice. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*" Hopefully, as we move through the sermon you will begin to grasp more fully that statement, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*"

I am going to take us back to an Old Testament prophecy this morning. Turn with me to Isaiah 9:1-6, page 638 in the pew Bibles. Listen to these words given by God to the prophet Isaiah. As you turn to Isaiah in your Bibles, I will share with you that there is another character in this prophecy who is not part of our nativity displays. Listen to these words and see if you can catch who Isaiah speaks of that is not part of our nativity displays. "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."<sup>i</sup> Did you catch the reference in that reading to a person God chose to use as part of His salvation plan? We might have caught the words Handel used for his chorus, "For unto us a child is born," but did we catch the reference to another character not part of our nativity sets? Those who are listening to Seedbed's wake up calls each morning will have the advantage. Any guesses? Yes, it is Gideon. There in the midst of these words about the child being born and people in darkness having light shine on them, we find a reference to Gideon. The reference is in verse 4 where Isaiah speaks to the removal of the burden of the people and the breaking of oppression as on the day of Midian. Now for those who missed the reference to Gideon, let me share with you that I

have read this verse many times and wondered why the Midian reference was there, but never made the connection until Matt Leroy shared the connection. Let me also share that I am not advocating for Gideon to become part of our nativity sets. We do remember Gideon, don't we? Israel had sinned, moved away from following God, and Midian was the oppressor God used to discipline His people. Israel was greatly oppressed by the Midianites; they brought darkness that spread over the land of Israel. The Midianites would come at the time of planting and harvest and spread out over the land, ruining the harvest so that Israel was greatly oppressed. So great was the darkness in the land that Israel cried out to God for relief, for help. Gideon was hiding in a winepress, a hole in the ground, threshing wheat so that he might have food to sustain his family. An angel of the Lord came to Gideon and called him "mighty warrior," telling him to go in this strength of his and defeat Midian. Gideon claimed he was no mighty warrior and that he was the least in Israel, from the smallest tribe and smallest family of that tribe. Gideon did listen to God's call and called out the tribes of Israel to come to fight Midian. Thirty-two thousand men responded and gathered to take on the army of Midian that numbered over 125,000. And God did something amazing. He had Gideon send warriors home to reduce their numbers. All who were scared were allowed to leave and 22,000 left. God told Gideon that he still had too many men, and had him watch them drink from a stream and cut the number of warriors from 10,000 to 300. Think about that for a moment: 300 men against more than 125,000. I hope we can grasp the smallness of this little band of men. God then explained to Gideon the battle plan. They were to take clay pots, a torch, and a trumpet, divide into three groups of 100 around the Midianite camp at night, and when Gideon gave the word, they were to smash the pots, hold up the torches in their left hand, and holding the trumpets in their right hand, blow the trumpets. Three hundred little points of light were to suddenly appear in the darkness. These three groups were not to be close to each other to support each other in battle. This was not a Spartan last stand and fight scenario. This was a small number of warriors spread out with no connection to one another whose attack plan was to smash a clay pot, hold up a torch, blow a trumpet, and trust God, really trust God. I hope we can grasp the smallness of this battle plan and the bravery and faith of those 300 who spread out on the hills around the Midianite camp and waited for Gideon's signal. The signal came, the pots were broken, the torches were raised high, the trumpets sounded, and, in the camp, chaos came and every man's sword was turned against another. One hundred, twenty-five thousand fell on that day, the day of Midian. God took a small group of men who trusted

him and defeated the hordes from Midian, and the people of Israel were set free. Light removed the darkness. God comes not with a greater force or some secret weapon, God comes as the small, the weak, the unlikely in order to remove “the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.”<sup>ii</sup> Gideon may have struggled a bit with accepting God’s call to be a mighty warrior, but God choose Gideon to be part of His story of salvation and Gideon said yes to God. God comes not with a greater force but with the smallest, the least, so that he might show His hand strong and carry out His plan to reconcile His people to Him. Isaiah tells us God will do this again. He will send the small, a child, to remove our yoke, burden, and darkness.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*” Pretty good. Isaiah’s words to Israel speak to a coming time when there will be another day like the day of Midian when God will act and bring about a great defeat of darkness, a day when light will again drive out darkness. Yet God works His salvation plan not with the mighty but through the lowly. In the small town of Nazareth, an angel comes to a young woman, a virgin who is named Mary. An angel shows up far from Jerusalem in a backwoods town. We know little about Mary. Luke does not provide an in-depth character development of who she is, only that she is betrothed to Joseph, but that they have not yet come together as husband and wife. God continues to work through people to bring about His salvation plan. Mary does not question the angel’s request of her, only asking how such a thing could happen, that she could have a child with no earthly father. In response to her question, we learn that Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. She is given a sign to confirm that what the angel Gabriel speaks will happen. She is told that her relative Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age. The shame of her barrenness has been removed. Nothing is impossible for God. Mary’s response to the angel is “Here I am, the servant of the Lord: *let it be with me according to your word.*” And with those words, Holy Spirit comes. The Most High God overshadows Mary, and she is with child, a holy child. As on the day of Midian, God is again at work bringing about the salvation of His people, not with torches, trumpets, and clay jars, but through a virgin’s womb. There is no superhero who will come and save the world, defeating the great armies of Rome. There is no sounding of trumpets to call troops to battle. Just a baby’s sweet cry. There is only a gentle shepherd who will change the hearts of the people from stone to flesh. Into the darkness of sin and death comes God in the flesh as a baby so that light may come into the

darkness and bring joy by removing the yoke of our burden, the bar across our shoulders, the rod of the oppressor as on the day of Midian.

Have you ever been where it is dark, really dark, a place where there is no light? In my short stint as a coal miner, I was left alone to monitor a piece of equipment one day while the rest of the crew went to pick up tools. I got the idea to turn off my head lamp to see if my eyes could see in the darkness. You know how when you turn off the light at night it gets very dark but as your eyes adjust you begin to see? Let me assure you there was no light in a mine shaft hundreds of feet underground. My eyes did not find any light by which to see. My eyes could not adjust. It was dark, completely dark, and I could see nothing. And then an indicator light on the equipment came on, one very small little bulb, and I could see. The light penetrated the dark. That small little bulb with its limited power was a bright light pushing back the darkness and letting me see. The light from that little bulb coming into the darkness around me reminds me of Jesus coming as light, true light, light that shines into our souls and removes the darkness of sin in each of us.

I discovered a while back that there are many YouTube channels devoted to all manner of topics. If you have an interest, you can find a channel and watch the videos people post on various topics. One of the channels I stumbled across is about a young couple who is trying to live off grid. They let you follow along through their videos as they build and develop their homestead without connection to the electrical grid. They record many of their projects such as developing their solar power system and share their experience. They often post a video I find interesting, and they are an engaging couple with a small child. In the last video I watched, they decided that for their child's first Christmas they needed to find a train for him to ride in and ended up buying an old train that had once been used for kids in malls and had been gathering dust under a shed. I found it interesting to follow along as they tried to get the electric train and its controllers to function again and enjoyed seeing how they conquered all of the struggles they had with frozen bearings in electrical motors and bad connections in the controller. Once they had their train running, they moved it to town to a parent's home and invited the neighborhood to come to a Christmas party. What spoke to me more than anything was that their Christmas party was full of kids but lacked Christ or even a nod to Santa. Their idea of Christmas was devoid of the reason for Christmas, a baby born in a manger to bring light to the world. Their idea of Christmas did not include a nativity set and they had no idea of looking for a John the Baptist figurine to add. Now I might be able to talk Fred or Bob into helping me find a little electric train

that used to have a life in a mall at Christmas and we could have a lot of fun getting it to run. We could even set it up in our parking lot and have a Christmas party that included Jesus or add it to our birthday party for Jesus. But how sad it is that those in the world are living in darkness and have no knowledge of the light that has come into the world. They seem to have no concept that Jesus has come and no hunger to receive the gift God has given to the world. They seek a Christmas that has no connection to God. Their celebration is more a fun evening than an entering into the joy from the coming of the Christ child. They are in darkness and need light to penetrate into their lives so that they might experience the day of Midian. It is as if the world is okay living in bondage to sin and death and has no hope for something different. There seems to be no cry from them to God for relief. Light has come as a baby in a manger, and we may have light with us, but the world still sits in deep darkness, not even aware of their desperate situation. Unlike Israel, they seem to no longer to sense their oppression or believe they can find relief by creating a happy moment.

Mary was instantly willing to let God use her in the salvation story when God asked her through Gabriel. Mary did not count the cost to her life when God called her to step into the salvation story. Mary chose to trust God to work out all of the details and simply replied, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*" Because of her willingness and openness to God to say "yes" to God's invitation to be part of our story of salvation, Mary was blessed to bring forth Jesus, the Word made flesh, the light of the world, God with us. Mary is an example for us as we seek to live as those who believe in and follow Jesus. Just as God invited Mary into our salvation story, God invites us to be used by Jesus in other people's salvation stories. God invites us, with a move of Holy Spirit in our hearts, to bear light, to go to lost sheep and be His witness. We are to open our hearts and be ready to respond to a touch of Holy Spirit on our hearts so that we will respond as Mary did with our own words: "Here I am, a servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word,*" and then go in the power of Holy Spirit to take light into the world. We are to be those who would stand in the dark, smash our clay jars, hold high the light of Christ, and lovingly share the Good News of Jesus. Our call may be as simple as blessing someone with a kind word or it may seem to be a costly request that requires us to rely fully on God's protection and provision as Mary did. Our response to God's call is to be as Mary's was: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*" Jesus came into the world through Mary's openness to be used by

God no matter the cost. Jesus will come into the darkness around us and shine on people when we also will humbly submit to his call and agree to be his witnesses in the lives of those Holy Spirit leads us to right here, right now. As the day of Midian has come to us through Mary's words and actions, let us see her example and love others by seeking to share with them the Good News of Jesus. Let Jesus use us in the coming year to shine a light into the darkness in the lives of people around us in this place. Let our response to Jesus' call always be, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be with me according to your word.*"

*Pray with me: Father God, we see those who sit in darkness and have never seen the light of Your Son, nor have they had light shine on them. Holy Spirit, come and guide us, come and transform us that we might hear you call us into their salvation stories and respond as Mary did, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Help us to carry light, your light into the world. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

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<sup>i</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 1595-1596). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid Verse 4