

Ave Maria: The Word Before the Songs

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Date: 01 December 2024

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Hi, my name is Sitara, and I'm part of CC Kids.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Luke 1, verses 26 to 38. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

[1 : 27] The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

His kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary, asked the angel, since I am a virgin. The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who was said to be unable to conceive in her sixth month.

For no word from God will ever fail. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. Thank you, Sitara, for that scripture reading. Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew, one of the pastors here. And I know what many of you are thinking.

[2 : 31] I've heard it three times already today. A lot of Jonathan vibes, right? I just want to set the record straight. I got mine first. And he liked it, so he got one of his own.

And the truth is, my shirt was just really wrinkled today. So I had to cover that up to not distract you. Let's get into God's Word. Let's pray. Father, we want to hear from you.

We thank you that you're a God who speaks to us. And we just ask that you would fill us with your Spirit such that we would listen and obey and trust and live the way that you want us to live.

The way that Jesus has set before us. Fill us with your Spirit, we ask. Make that change happen in our lives. For all of us. For all of us, God.

To walk in the way of Jesus. To know the way of the blessed person. In his name we pray. Amen. So, happy Thanksgiving, everyone. And if you're new today or just visiting with family and friends for this holiday weekend, we want to welcome you to Christchurch on this first Sunday of Advent.

[3 : 38] You know, here at Christchurch, typically for Advent, we preach through the prophets for the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas. We want to hear from the voices that foretold the Advent, the arrival of the Messiah.

And then at Christmas Eve, that's when we open up one of the Gospels. We're in one of the Gospels every year from Christmas to Easter. But we usually don't open that up until Christmas Eve. But this year we're doing something different.

Since we're in Luke's Gospel this year, we're, again, we're doing something a little bit different. You know, there are four Gospels, right? Four Gospel accounts in the New Testament. And there are three of them in which Jesus is born in chapter 1.

But in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus actually isn't even born yet until chapter 2. So, instead of preaching from the prophets this Advent, instead of giving our attention to God's words to His people 400 plus years before the birth of Christ this Advent, we're giving our attention to the first words that God spoke after 400 years of silence.

This Advent, we're starting right here in Luke chapter 1, which is the story of the last 15 months before the long-awaited Advent of the Messiah. And in particular, we're going to be looking at some songs that are sung in the beginning chapters of Luke's Gospel.

[4 : 56] One, the song of an inconspicuous teenager from a no-name town. Mary's song is also called the Magnificat, right? The song of an infertile priest who'd spent his life serving a God whom his people hadn't heard from for centuries.

Zechariah's song, the song of John the Baptist's dad. And then we're going to look at Simeon's song in chapter 2, the song of a man very much near his expiration date, yet who'd been waiting his entire life believing that he'd get to see God keep His promise to send a Savior.

So those are the three songs we're going to start looking at next week. Mary's song, Zechariah's song, and Simeon's song. And for the third through fifth graders out here, if you can remember what those three songs are and find me in the next three weeks, I might just have a prize for you, alright?

But I want to know what those three songs are, the names of them, and also where you find them in the Bible, alright? And I'll give you a clue. It's here in Luke chapter 1 and 2, alright? I want the verses too, alright?

Mary's song, Zechariah's song, and Simeon's song. Three songs, really, that are songs of faith. Songs of hoping against hope, celebrating the unlikely, unexpected, world-changing thing that God was finally about to accomplish through His Son, Jesus Christ.

[6 : 08] So that's our plan this Advent. And as we're going through these songs, the question I want the rest of us to really think about is this. How could Mary and Zechariah sing with such joy and confidence before the Messiah was even born?

And even after Jesus was born, how could Simeon hold baby Jesus in his arms and be at complete peace and say, I can die happy now just by setting his eyes on this baby who had at this point accomplished literally nothing for the world?

This Advent, starting today, as we enter into this magical, musical Christmas season and hear and sing and enjoy the songs that we've sung for centuries about Jesus, I want us to consider the question.

What is it that makes the heart sing? And especially under unfavorable, undesirable, and uncertain circumstances like Mary's, like Zechariah's, like Simeon's, and maybe like yours today.

This is the personal question that I'm asking. What is it that could possibly make your heart sing in a broken and fearful world like ours? What reason is there to sing the songs of Christmas or any songs of love, joy, hope, and peace at all?

[7 : 26] I imagine for many of us it's probably very hard to sing with real hope and joy when we consider the state of the world or even just the state of our own personal lives. Have you ever tried to sing and make joyful music when you're just down and crestfallen and when your heart isn't in it?

Either you can't do it, or if you do pull it off, it's just super inauthentic, right? It doesn't hit, it's poorly done. Years ago I remember watching this TikTok video of this little boy who was holding up a sheet of music to his face like this.

And there's someone playing a piano in the background, probably his mom, and the caption of the video reads, Asian mom forces son to join church choir. And in this video the little boy is there, and he's weeping, and he's sobbing, and he's angry.

And at the same time he's standing up straight, dutifully practicing the song, Jesus Loves Me. So picture this little Asian boy weeping and sobbing and like occasionally growling at his mom and trying to sing Jesus Loves Me at the same time.

And it's actually quite impressive and super hilarious. But what makes it so funny is that you just know that Jesus Loves Me is like the furthest thing on this kid's mind, right?

[8 : 49] He can't sing Jesus Loves Me with any kind of passion or authenticity because all he can think about is how he hates practicing this song and how frustrated he is with his mom. And see, that's the thing about singing.

Singing is best performed when our hearts are attuned to all the things that we're singing about, right? The best kind of singing is from the heart, from our core convictions. The best kind of singing happens when a song expresses our inner feelings and commitments in more than just words.

And when that's missing, when your heart is nowhere close to the heart of a song, man, it's hard to sing. It's hard to sing for joy when you feel like you have no hope and thus no reason for joy. And yet this Advent, what we're about to see are three people who did just that.

Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon. They sing with hope and with joy when hope and joy seem incredibly elusive. And you know, that is precisely the spirit of Advent.

Advent is a season for us to acknowledge the real darkness surrounding us while still testifying in song. We will sing here every week about the light that's coming back into the world.

[9 : 52] We will sing of our unforeseen yet confident hope, the coming of Jesus to make all things right again. And here at Christ Church, what you will hear again and again in this place is that Jesus, the maker of our hearts, is the one and only one who can make our hearts sing.

If you love the music here, if the week in and week out singing of our congregation, if it does something for you, if you've noticed that we keep on singing here regardless of what else is going on in the world, if that's made an impression on you, you need to know that Jesus is the inspiration of our songs in this place.

Just as he was for Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon. That is how amazing this Messiah is to us. Now, of course, we realize that just as Jesus hadn't yet arrived or accomplished anything for those three singers at the beginning of Luke's gospel, he also is yet to come to us, yet to make all things right and new, yet to bring the story of the world to its perfect consummation, yet to bend the moral arc of the universe back toward justice once and for all.

So when we sing our songs of hope and joy here, we're singing also by faith. Faith in God's promises, faith in God's word, and that's where we're starting our series today.

The title of the sermon this morning is The Word Before Our Songs. We're looking at what theologians have called the Annunciation. The word from God through the angel Gabriel announcing the birth of Christ to Mary.

[11 : 20] An announcement, a word from God that's been turned into a song of its own. You may have heard of it in Latin, Ave Maria, or in English, Hail Mary. The annunciation, the announcement of the birth of Christ. This is the inspiration for all our Christmas songs, and certainly for Mary's and Zechariah's and Simeon's.

And if we are willing to join them in faith and trust this word from God, this word that can make our hearts sing, we will know His joy. And I'm pretty sure that every single person in this room wants that.

Whether you believe the story about Jesus or not, I'm pretty sure that deep down you at least believe or you want to believe that your heart was made to sing for joy from the inmost part of your being.

And I know that you want to believe that there is a way that that can happen. As Buddy the Elf said, right, the best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear. We all want that. The question is, how do we get there?

Who can inspire such a song? I want to argue it's only God, and it's only His word. It's only the word of God that points us to Christ. So let's look at that word that God sent after 400 years of silence to Mary in Nazareth.

[12 : 28] So here's some context. Look with me at verse 26. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. So we're not starting all the way at the beginning of Luke chapter 1.

There's a passage that's come right before the text that you heard read. And in that passage, the angel Gabriel had already just visited someone else. He'd visited the high priest in the temple at Jerusalem named Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, who was a relative of Mary's.

And Gabriel let Zechariah know in that temple that even after many years of their family's barrenness, they were going to have a son. And he was going to be a prophet, and he was going to prepare the way for the Messiah.

We know this prophet to be John the Baptist. So that's just what's happened right before our text. And now we're here in verse 26. We're here six months after that announcement about John the Baptist. And now we're looking at another announcement from Gabriel.

But this time, not down south, not in the great city of Jerusalem, but in the least expected little podunk village of Nazareth, up north in Galilee.

[13 : 32] And not only is the location of this word unexpected, but so also is the recipient of this word incredibly unexpected. Verse 27 says, This word from God came to a virgin, pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. So here the word is coming not to this girl's soon-to-be husband, not to the patriarch of her soon-to-be family. No, the main character in this scene is just a little girl, Mary, who many commentators think could have been as young as 12 years old.

Think like Dorothy or Helen, right? Or Aidy, right? Just a teenager, if that. A little girl who no one expected to play much of a role in history.

A little girl merely pledged to some ordinary Jewish carpenter, also whom no historian would have ever known to include in their telling of world history. But here she is, a key and main character in this passage.

So what you have here is after 400 plus years of silence from God, not just a word from God to the high priest in the temple as you might expect in Jerusalem, but just as importantly, if not more, a word from God to an otherwise unknown teenage girl from a no-name town called Nazareth, all the way on the other side of the map, which no one would have expected.

[14 : 50] And this is the unexpected word that God communicated to her, verse 28. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, or Hail, or Good Day. You can also read this as a command. Rejoice!

Mary, rejoice! You who are highly favored, the Lord is with you. The word for favored here is from the same root as grace. So after 400 plus years of silence, God's first words are, Zechariah, do not be afraid, and Mary, rejoice!

For I'm about to lavish my grace upon you, and that is your identity now. That is who you are in the eyes of God, and I will be with you. The Lord, Yahweh, is with you. The same words that were spoken to the ancient patriarchs that Mary grew up learning about, to Abraham, to Isaac, Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, God said, I will be with you.

He is saying those same words of comfort and courage to her. He is saying these same things that He's always said to people when He was about to accomplish something great in and through them. He says that now to Mary of Nazareth.

The very presence of God is going to come upon you, Mary, and protect you, and bless you, and honor you, and fill you, and accomplish through you the greatest thing that has ever happened in the history of the world.

[15 : 59] This was an incredible honor and encounter, a stunning greeting. As one commentator put it, greetings like hail were normal, but rank and status within society determined whom one should greet and with what words.

As both a woman and a young person, perhaps 12 or 14 years old, not yet married, Mary had virtually no social status, and neither the title favored or grace won, nor the promise the Lord is with you were traditional in greetings back then, even if she were a person of status.

And yet this is precisely how God chooses to address Mary. Our God is a God of grace, who loves to honor the lowly, who loves to accomplish the impossible and turn upside down the ways and the values of the cities of men in His perfect, everlasting kingdom.

Now, verse 29 says, Mary was greatly troubled. I think a better translation is perplexed. She's confused, even curious and reflective. She isn't skeptical so much as she's curious to understand more.

Verse 29 says, Mary was greatly perplexed at his words and wondered or inquired or sought to better understand what kind of greeting this might be. So Gabriel says there, verse 30, do not be afraid, Mary.

[17 : 13] You have found favor with God. Again, that word favor, Gabriel is saying, don't be afraid, Mary. This isn't a scary greeting. This is a gracious greeting toward you from the word of God.

This is a word of grace. Contrary to what many people believe about this, you know, magical Hail Mary prayer where people say this prayer to Mary as if she has this kind of special grace and power to bestow on those who pray this formulaic prayer to her.

No, Mary isn't full of grace because of anything magical about her, but because of the grace of God that is lavished upon her. This gracious greeting from God to Mary is not on the basis of Mary's merits, but solely on the basis of God's gracious pleasure.

Not because of anything Mary's done, but simply because she is God's chosen vessel for the demonstration of His sovereign grace. She brings no outstanding credentials to this task. In fact, she's a person living just out on the margins.

She brings nothing on her resume other than her availability and her willingness to serve. She has no training or preparation. All she has is this gracious promise from God and an invitation and challenge to trust what He says, to trust His word.

[18 : 21] And this is the promise she has challenged to trust, verse 31. Verse 32. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. So basically, He's saying, Mary, even as a virgin, you're about to conceive.

And the son you have, you don't even get to name Him. I'm going to name Him. And the name's going to be Jesus, which means Yahweh saves. That's going to be the purpose of His life. And this isn't going to be just any son, Mary, but a son who saves.

And He's not even going to be primarily known by people as the son of Mary and Joseph. He's going to be known as the Son of the Most High, a divine son who will restore David's throne and kingdom forever and ever.

So these are some radical claims, right? Some radical claims. In one sense, they're even kind of undesirable, definitely unexpected, even if in another sense, they're almost too good to be true at the same time, right?

[19 : 24] Is Mary just supposed to believe this perplexing word from God? Would you? Would you? How would you, how do you think you'd respond? How do you think you'd respond to an angelic messenger like this with such a message as this, right?

Well, notice how Mary responds to this word, this announcement of good news. Look at verse 34. She's actually attentive, and she's curious, and she's eager to understand more. Verse 34, how will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin?

And listen, this is different than the way Zechariah previously questioned Gabriel when he came to him at the temple. Zechariah was asking, how shall I know this will happen?

How can I know that this is going to happen? Zechariah was asking, how can this be? Mary's asking, how will this be? By faith. By faith.

She believes it will happen, but she wants to understand more how it's going to happen even though she's a virgin, right? So Mary responds with faith and curiosity, even with all the question marks that surely would have been swirling around in her head.

[20 : 30] And even when the angel answers the question, there are still a ton of question marks left, right? The response that Gabriel gives Mary in answering this question, how will this be, it's honestly just as curious and mysterious as the announcement of her virgin pregnancy.

In verse 35, Gabriel says, So in response to this question, how is this going to happen?

The answer is simply, well, it's going to be a Holy Spirit miracle. The holy, eternal Son of God is somehow just going to be born from you, Mary, through the working of the Holy Spirit. That's all she's given.

That's all she's told. All Mary is told is that she's going to conceive as a virgin somehow through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that her son will be the son of God and reign over an eternal kingdom forever.

She won't get to name him. His name's going to be Yahweh saves Jesus of Nazareth, and that she's supposed to just rejoice because this is God showing grace and favor and giving his presence to her.

[21 : 31] And then the other thing that Gabriel mentions to her in verse 36 is, even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fail.

Now again, can you imagine having this kind of encounter with an angel as a 13-year-old? How would you receive a message like this?

Like, I know the story for many of us who've been in the church for a while or celebrated many Christmases. I know it's very familiar, but I really hope you can see how strange this episode is and how much reason Mary had not to believe, not to trust in this word from God, not to rejoice.

How much reason Mary had to be afraid and feel defeated as a teenage Jewish girl from Nazareth under the occupation of the Roman Empire. We shouldn't take it so easily for granted that, oh, of course Mary believed this word from God through the angel Gabriel.

Her faith was just as miraculous as what was predicted to come. It's not like she was just some ancient, superstitious, naive little girl who could just believe anything from anyone, you know, in comparison to us, you know, modern, sophisticated, enlightened Western scientific people.

[22 : 46] No, Mary had just as little reason to believe that a virgin or like a post-menopausal woman could be pregnant as any of us. Just as little reason to believe that she of all people would have a son who would be the son of the Most High God and who would reign over a kingdom that would outlast the Roman Empire.

And if she knew anything as a faithful Jewish little girl, it was that God, God isn't born of a human person. God isn't born of a woman. She had tons of reasons not to believe this word from God, and yet everything she was supposed to know about the world and about herself and about her village and about God and about the Messiah, all of this was turned upside down by this word, this announcement from God.

And my question is how then? How could she believe? Why did she believe? And maybe that's a question you have this morning as you're wrestling with who Jesus is and why He came.

Why should I believe? How could I believe this? How could I believe in God's words about Jesus as the King and as the Savior of the world? Well, the answer is not that God has a logical, rational, all-satisfying answer for you.

He didn't give that to Mary. He didn't give her complete certainty about the future and all the outcomes and all the mechanics of how everything would play out. No, far from that.

[24 : 04] All He gives her is a one-of-a-kind promise and the opportunity to trust His word and play a part in His incredible story. A choice to trust what He says about Jesus as the Savior and King of the world or to trust what others say about what is possible in the world.

I want you to look again at verse 36. God's word to her is this. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and listen to this, Did you hear that?

She who was said to be unable. There's a contrast here that Luke is bringing up to us. A contrast between the words of people who think they know what is possible and what is impossible and the word of God that never fails, the word of God that actually defines what is possible.

Mary had the option of believing what everyone else said about Elizabeth's pregnancy, what everyone else was about to say about her pregnancy and about her son, or she could believe what God said about her and her pregnancy and her son.

She could trust in the words of her fellow humans, or she could trust in the word of her Father in heaven. The word that spoke, let there be light, and there was light. Those were her two options, and she wisely chooses the latter.

[25 : 28] For no matter what Mary thought she knew about the realm of pregnancy possibilities and the likelihood of an eternal divine king somehow coming from her womb, her first and foremost commitment was to the certainty of God's infallible word.

The word of God will never fail. That was her first commitment, and that is how she was able to bless the world. That's what she held on to. She held on to this word from God, even if she couldn't understand it.

Even if she hadn't experienced God do anything like this before, she held on to this word of God by faith against all hope she hoped. Not because God's word made perfect, complete, logical, or even theological sense to her.

Not because she knew with any kind of verifiable certainty about the future, but because she knew and trusted in the power of God and His word, just as the faithful people of God always have, particularly the mighty women of God of old, right?

Putting aside all her reasons to doubt, Mary recalled the power of the word of God and the faith of those who went before her, particularly the women who advanced God's redemptive history through unlikely birth after unlikely birth, right?

[26 : 40] Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and now Elizabeth, and now her. And not knowing exactly how this would all work or happen or come to be or what it would look like for the Son of the Most High to come forth into the world and reign forever in the line of David with tons of question marks, tons of unknowns, Mary, the highly favored one of God, full of His grace by faith, says in verse 38, I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

May your rhema, may your word to me be fulfilled. Let it be, Lord. Let your word be. That was her prayer of response. Lord, just as at the beginning of time and just as it has always been for your people, for Sarah and Abraham and all the rest of your faithful people, let your word be no matter what your word says.

No matter what your word is, I trust it because it's your word. Leave my home to follow you. Offer up my only begotten son to you. Carry the stigma of being seen in my village as the promiscuous teen who got pregnant before my marriage to Joseph.

Bring that kind of shame upon my household, my father and my mother. Have a child who I don't even get to name and whose life trajectory plan I don't really get to have a say in and probably raise him as a single mother since Joseph's of course going to want to call off the wedding.

And of course, no one in the village is going to want to help me. And then have this child who will be a daily reminder to me that my life is not my own and that my life is not about me but about him and someone else.

[28 : 09] She says, okay, sure. Let it be. I am the Lord's servant. May your word be fulfilled in me. Mary trusted God's word with an incredible faith here.

An incredible faith knowing that it would cost her being willing to enter into tons of uncertainty, being willing to subject her story to God's grander story, the more central story of his son.

This is a truly remarkable picture of faith in God's story, in God's word. But listen, the point of this sermon isn't simply to say, hey, be more like Mary.

Have more faith. Trust God more. Try harder to believe. No, if you think the point is about Mary, then you're missing the point of Mary. Think about it.

Do you realize what Mary is doing in this passage? Think about what she is illustrating. What is she doing here? She is laying her life down for the Son of God. She is saying, I am not my own.

[29 : 09] My life is not my own. But I am going to give myself fully to the story of God and unto the service of the Son of God. He can even use my body. He can change my life plans. He could jeopardize my reputation, my life, my body, my reputation.

They are not mine, but all of me is all for him. And this, this is meant to point beyond Mary. This is a picture of the gospel.

It's a picture of the gospel before the gospel, even before knowing that her son would lay his life down for her in the most ultimate way on a shameful, bloody cross to conquer sin and death.

For her and the rest of the world, Mary prefigured the Messiah. By faith and even without knowing it, she was demonstrating to the world and to us 2,000 years later the beauty and the honor and the goodness of serving the unseen Son of God by faith.

And laying our lives down for the one who laid his life down for us. And this is what this Advent story is calling us to. To trust this word.

[30 : 13] To trust this word that can and will make us sing. To surrender our stories to the story of God's Son. And to do so in faith. By faith in his promises. You know, at least for us, we have far more reason than Mary.

Far more inspiration to submit ourselves to God's word and faith, right? She had no idea how her son would serve her. But we, we know. We will celebrate it here at this table what he has done.

In the same way that Jesus' mother said, I am your servant, may your word to me be fulfilled. We know that Jesus said the same to his father in heaven. Not my will, but yours be done. And he went to the cross.

And then from that cross he said, into your hands I commit my spirit. Jesus was pleased to say, I am your servant. To his father and not only to his father, but to us.

The king of heaven came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for us. This, this is why we can trust the word of God.

[31 : 13] Because the word of God is Christ unto us. It's the word of Christ unto us. We trust the word of God, not because it always makes sense according to the worldly wisdom of human logic, but because of a higher logic.

The logic of Christ's cruciform love and resurrection power. The logic of faith in his goodness and beauty. So this Advent, whatever words, whatever logic, whatever ideologies you might be entertaining you, that lead you to doubt.

That lead you to think that certain things are impossible for God. That lead you to doubt the possibility of hope and joy and light in Christ. God wants us to remember his word to Mary.

This word that made her into a servant and singer unto God. This word that didn't ask anything from her, but that spoke a gracious word to her, inviting her to rejoice in faith.

Even in the darkness. That's the invitation to us this Advent. An invitation to rejoice by faith and to submit ourselves as servants unto the story of the servant, Savior, King, Son of God, Jesus Christ.

[32 : 26] Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we ask for this kind of faith. This kind of Holy Spirit-inspired faith. To believe your words, to trust your words, and to live out of your words as servants, just like our servant Savior, Jesus.

And as we go forth in faith, filled with your Spirit, oh God, make a difference in this world. Bear witness to your everlasting kingdom. Your better kingdom. The kingdom that all of our hearts long for.

Make us your witnesses, oh God, in Jesus' name. Amen.