

Nine Lessons and Carols

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Preacher: Dr. Bruce Hindmarsh

[0 : 0 0] You may be seated. Good evening. This traditional service of nine lessons and carols is a wonderful way, a great way to prepare our hearts for Christmas, especially because it takes us on a kind of journey.

If there are any children here, I want you to think of the journey through these nine scripture readings this afternoon as a kind of journey of a seed, sort of like the acorn that the saber-toothed squirrel Scrat chases in the Ice Age movies.

And I hope all the adults here know what I'm talking about. Remember how there is at first just a simple acorn, but as it bounces along with Scrat chasing it, it causes a chain of events, moving pebbles, then rocks, then boulders, starting landslides, carving out canyons, dislodging glaciers, and even making continents to drift apart.

Well, the Bible tells a story of a seed as well. Our opening reading this afternoon from Genesis tells the story of how our first ancestors disobeyed God and how suffering entered the world.

But in the midst of judgment, we hear the first mention of a seed, a seed that will one day crush the head of the primeval serpent, a seed, sort of like Scrat's acorn.

[1 : 3 4] And then the next reading speaks of God's promise to Abraham that his seed will one day bless all nations on earth. The prophet Isaiah continues the story of this seed in the next two readings by speaking of one particular child who will be like a fresh green shoot from the stump of King David's family tree. And then we finally come to the gospel readings that tell us that this seed is planted by God in Mary's womb. This is the long-expected Jesus born to set his people free. After all the prophecies of the seed, this finally is the one. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. What a deeply personal story this is. Just think how personal it gets for Mary in the passage that was just read for us from Luke chapter 1 where the angel Gabriel visits

Mary. Here Mary, I think, teaches us this afternoon how to prepare our own hearts for Christmas. We can listen with her to the angel's words. We can respond with her to the good news announced by the angel Gabriel. We need to hear with Mary and we need to respond with Mary. We need, I think, to know the answer to two questions. What is the good news announced by Gabriel to me? And how should I respond?

First then, what is the good news announced by Gabriel to me? Gabriel speaks three times in the passage. The first time he says, the Lord is with you. The second time he says, the Lord is in you. And the third time he says, the Lord is over you. God is initiating the last act in the great drama. And the ancient story is now about to come to its climax. And the first thing Gabriel has to say is, Mary, I have come a long way to tell you, you are someone who has received great kindness, great grace from God. The Lord is with you. And the word of God comes to us this afternoon to say the same thing. It's because of the Christmas story that I can say, Bruce, you are someone who has received real grace from God. The Lord is with you. The old prophecy of Emmanuel has come true. The Lord is with me.

And I think this is one of the first messages we all need to hear to prepare for Christmas. God is not remote or distant. He is here, close, present in our real lives. Can you say this Christmas, the Lord is here and he is with me? In his second speech, Gabriel says, in effect, not just that the Lord is with you, but the Lord will be in you, Mary. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. Mary literally receives the eternal word of God intimately into her own body so that the word of God dwells and grows within her. But what Mary does bodily and physically, we are called to do spiritually. Paul says that the secret that was kept hidden for ages and generations has now been declared. And it's this, Christ in you, the hope of glory in you. Paul tells new believers that he is desperate to see Christ formed in you, in you. As one of my friends like to say, say, say you can't get closer than in.

[5 : 29] Well, here too, can you respond with Mary this Christmas season to allow the eternal word of God to enter you more deeply and to grow within you, to dwell in you richly. Mary's response to this message is one of understandable bewilderment. How will this be since I have not known a man? I do not have a husband. And here is where we get the third important speech of the angel Gabriel.

Not only the Lord is with you, not only the Lord is in you, the Lord shall be over you. If the second message from Gabriel was about the coming of the eternal Son of God, the second or rather the third message is about the power of the eternal Spirit of God to do the impossible. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the Most High will overshadow you. Nothing is impossible with God. The Spirit of God will do this. As the Spirit hovered over the waters of the first creation, so the Spirit will hover over the second creation. As the Spirit of God filled the tabernacle, or as the glory of God descended like a cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration, so also here at the conception of our Savior, Jesus Christ, God become man. Here also the Spirit of God and His glory would come upon Mary.

But we need this work of the Holy Spirit too. It takes God to reveal God. We need to hear this gospel good news from Gabriel with Mary. The Lord the Holy Spirit will come to us too. And that's the promise of Pentecost. The early church father Irenaeus said that God the Father reaches out to us directly to embrace us with the two hands of His Son and His Spirit. And this seems to be what Gabriel says to Mary. And he says it also to us in our spiritual barrenness. God the Holy Spirit makes us fruitful. Nothing is impossible with God. So as we prepare for Christmas, we hear the good news.

The Lord is with us. The Lord wants to be in us. And the Lord wants to be over us. This is what it means to be family, like Mary. We must receive and obey God's Word as Mary did. More briefly then, how do I respond with Mary? If that's how I listen with Mary, how do I respond with Mary? In pictures of the Annunciation, Mary typically has one hand covering her heart, one hand facing out in astonishment, and her head slightly bowed. These three movements of her body in pictures in art history, these three movements of her body nicely symbolize the threefold response that she made to the gospel. And this too provides a pattern for us today, this afternoon. First, the hand stretched out in astonishment. This is the normal reaction of self-protection. And it stands for the response of honest questioning. Mary was troubled. And her first speech, she speaks twice, her first speech is to ask, how can this be?

This probably should also be our first response to the gospel. If we really comprehend what it might mean to have God with us, to have God in us, to have God over us, we will be left with some questions.

[9 : 02] No person, time past or time present, has ever received the Word of God painlessly. The Word of God came to Mary intimately, interiorly, but it was also an alien word that she could never fully understand. Simeon prophesied that a sword would pierce her heart.

The Word of God turned Mary's life upside down. So also for you and for me. We cannot predict what God will ask of us, and we must expect God's Word to disrupt our lives. Honest questioning with Mary is a part of the Christmas story. Here is where we ought to bring all our questions. Asking with Mary, how can this be? Secondly, there is the head slightly bowed as a sign of submission. And this corresponds to Mary's second speech. Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to thy word. This is the response not just of honest questioning, but of reverent submission, even when all our questions are not answered or are not all answered. This is Mary's yes to the Word of God. Mary says yes to salvation. And this too is a pattern for us. She is the first one to say yes to Jesus Christ. I expect many of us have areas in our lives where this Christmas we can open our hearts with Mary to say in a deeper way, yes, Lord, yes. Let it be to me according to thy word.

And then finally, there is the hand held across the heart in joyful wonder. After honest questioning and reverent submission, there is joyful wonder. The Magnificat, or Mary's song, is recorded by Luke just a few verses down, and it begins, my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. It's a song of great, great joy. Joy to the world.

And here too, I can respond with Mary to celebrate the great grace that has appeared for me personally in all that God has done in Jesus Christ at Christmas. So the message we listen to, the Lord with you, the Lord in you, the Lord over you. And the response with Mary, honest questioning, reverent submission, joyful wonder. And do you know how her song ends? It ends with a reprise on

that old prophecy of the seed.

He has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our forebears, to Abraham and his seed. Forever. This one small seed planted at Christmas has changed the world forever. Amen. [12 : 05] Amen. Thank you.