

Not a Silent Night

Full of Grace Frankton – 12/20/15

Scripture: Luke 1.26-33 The annunciation

Proposition: Grace is given to us and should be given away.

[SLIDE] This is the third sermon in this Advent series titled: Not a Silent Night. It's based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. We are looking at Jesus' life through the eyes of Mary, his mother. We are doing this pretty differently than normal. We are going backward starting with Mary's later years and then ending up on the night Jesus was born. The First week we looked at Mary around 60 years old, facing her own death and reflecting upon it in the light of the death and resurrection of her son. Last week we looked backward in time, closer to that first Christmas to a time about fifteen years before Mary's death, to the day she watched her son die on the cross. Today, we're looking at the day that Mary found out she was chosen by God to be the earthly mother of the Son of God. We read the scripture a moment ago where the angel Gabriel told Mary of God's plan. That scene is commonly called the annunciation – the announcement to Mary.

This may shock some of you, but when the angel appeared to Mary she was probably what we would still call a child: thirteen, fourteen, maybe fifteen years of age. She was living in a tiny little town in the middle of nowhere, the village of Nazareth. Nazareth was such an insignificant little hamlet that it doesn't even show up on first century maps. It was a nowhere-ville in the middle of nowhere. And to add to that, Mary was on the lowest rung of Jewish society. She was a peasant girl. She wasn't a Roman citizen. She was simply from a poor Galilean family of no importance among her own people. Yet, it was to this unlikely girl that the angel Gabriel came and announced that she would give birth to the long-awaited for Messiah.

The story begins with God's angel, Gabriel, appearing in this tiny insignificant hamlet in one of the remotest parts of the Roman Empire. We don't know what Gabriel looked like when he appeared to Mary. There's no mention of angel's wings or that Gabriel hovered above the ground wings a-flapping. Maybe he did appear that way, but more than likely, Gabriel appeared as a normal man, unknown to Mary, and gave her the announcement that rocked her world. This was no accident. I don't think God threw a dart at a map and it stuck Nazareth and Joachim (yo-a-kim) and Anne's house (Mary's parents). God chose Mary for the task of birthing the Savior of the world.

So this begs the questions – why? Why would God choose such an obviously unqualified teenage girl to be the mother of his son? Because she was his earthly mother, no one ever had a greater connection to the earthly Jesus than did Mary. There was no one who played a more central role in Jesus' life than Mary. Gabriel didn't explain God's choice of Mary, but Mary did some guessing, some might say interpreting, and sang them to us in her song. Many of you know that Mary's Magnificat is Mary's song she sang when she went to her cousin Elizabeth's house shortly after she learned she was pregnant. Elizabeth's own unborn baby (John the Baptist) jumped in her womb when he first heard Mary's voice. Mary then speaks: [SLIDE] *How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl....* [LK 1.47-48]

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There's Mary's answer to the question of why God chose her: [SLIDE] Because God looks favorably upon the lowly. Some of the rest of her song/speech says that God lifts up the lowly and blesses the hungry; yet he scatters the proud, brings down the powerful and sends the rich away empty. I think that Mary believed that God chose her specifically because she was a nobody in society. She was a teenage peasant girl from the peasant area of Galilee. Her qualifications were that she was humble, she loved God and would follow his commands willingly offering herself wholly to God.

This idea of God choosing the humble and lowly is consistent with Old Testament scripture that Mary would have known. God chose Abraham and Sarah, two octogenarians to be the Mom and Dad of the chosen people Israel. God chose Moses, a man who broke God's law, who murdered another man, to be God's lawgiver to Israel. God chose David, the youngest and scrawniest son of Jesse, to be Israel's greatest ruler. And now God has chosen Mary, a teenage peasant girl from the peasant area of Galilee.

My guess is that Jesus saw Mary and Joseph live their lives believing in God's penchant for the humble and lowly. It's an important theme in Jesus' ministry. We hear it in several of Jesus' teachings. [SLIDE] *For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.* [MT 23.12] [SLIDE] *Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant....* [MK 10.43] [SLIDE] *So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.* [LK 13.30] When Jesus chose his disciples, he didn't choose rabbis that had been trained in the Temple. He didn't choose Torah scholars. He chose un-theologically trained fishermen, tax collectors and shepherds. All of them unlikely candidates to be able to take God's word to the masses after Jesus died. He taught them humility at the Last Supper when he washed their feet.

The Christmas story of the Annunciation of Mary is a call for us to be humble before our God. That theme continued when there was no room for Jesus to be born in the inn or the guest room, but rather he had to be born in a stable where all the animals were birth-watchers. And later the theme continued when the first people invited to see Jesus were not the Magi, the kings who arrived many months later, but rather some lowly shepherds watching their flocks on the hillside by night. The story is a call to humility.

When Gabriel came to Mary he said: [SLIDE] *Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.* [1.28] Our good Catholic friends know this passage as the Hail Mary or the Ave Maria prayer: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." The words "favored one" and "full of grace" are translations of a Greek word that is way too long to worry about (14 letters). Let's just say that the root word that the 14-letter word comes from is the Greek word "charis." This word is used over 170 times on the New Testament in one form or another. Over half of those times, it is translated as the English word "grace."

So Mary is full of grace. So what does the word "grace" mean? It's one of those words that we throw around in our everyday life. Or course, we sing about Amazing Grace, that's really God's grace. We say that certain people who act a certain way or whose movements have certain characteristics are said to be graceful. We then pause before meals to offer grace. But what did the word "grace" mean to the New Testament writers? Grace is God's blessings, his care, his forgiveness, his kindness, his gifts, his goodness, his love, his work on our behalf, and his

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salvation. But it's not just that. These things are given to us even though we don't deserve them. They are the pure gifts from God. They are God's grace toward us. And God's grace has the power to change our lives.

Grace has power. When you give kindness, compassion, goodness and love to someone who you don't think deserves it, that graceful act has the power to change hearts, heal broken relationships, and reconcile people and nations. [SLIDE] Grace changes the one who receives it and also the one who give it. Grace can transform us. We find other people changed when we are kind to them even though we think they don't deserve it. We also find our hearts changed by that process.

So I've used a phrase a couple of times in this sermon that I want to flesh out a little bit. It's the phrase "you didn't think deserved grace." I want to give you an illustration about grace and who deserves it. Luke records that Jesus was invited to a righteous man's house for dinner and he accepts the invitation. Being a righteous man, this is someone that you might say did deserve grace. Jesus and this man were dining when, to the horror of the righteous man, one of the town prostitutes crashes the dinner party. Now the prostitute is certainly someone you might say "didn't deserve grace" because of her profession. Yet this sinful woman wept at Jesus' feet and wiped her tears with her hair. So why did she do that. Somewhere along the way, and we don't know where, Jesus had shown her compassion, kindness, forgiveness, love, in short grace. And grace affected her. Meanwhile the righteous man could do nothing but look on this woman with a disdainful look in his eyes. How dare she?! Here's the question: When we don't have grace, what fills the gap? The answer: [SLIDE] pride. God opposes the proud and lifts up the humble.

Ok, so this brings us all the way back to the words we started this sermon with. They are the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary. "Hail Mary full of grace" No truer words were ever spoken. Yes, Mary was humble, not proud. Yes, she was from peasant stock, not nobility. God believed her to be full of grace in her current state. But you see, soon Mary's belly would be completely full of grace. She would literally be full of grace, as the child forming in her womb would be the embodiment of grace. According to the Apostle John: [SLIDE] *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* [JN 1.17]

Christmas reminds us of God's grace. It reminds us of his blessings, forgiveness, kindness and love though we don't really deserve them. Jesus came to show God's grace to humankind. So, during this Advent season and into the Christmas season, as we celebrate the birth of grace embodied, the gift of salvation on the cross, and the certain hope of the resurrection, we celebrate the gift of grace.

As you think about grace this season, remember that when you receive grace, you are meant to give it away. Christmas is a wonderful time of year to share grace. Is there someone you know who has wronged you or hurt you, someone you don't think deserves your grace, or even a Christmas card from you? What would happen if you showed grace to that person? The honest answer is maybe nothing. Maybe your grace toward them would have no immediate effect on them. But maybe, just maybe, it would make a difference in their life. And quite possibly it would make a difference in your life

