

6 December 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Nanda Groenewald

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Hymn: CH4 279 Make way

PRAYER

Gracious God,
may this Advent be a time of turning our faces
towards your light,
and an opportunity to pause,
to reflect attentively
and to watch expectantly.
May we honour the present moment
in our looking ahead,
and cherish the things of today
as we wait for the things of tomorrow,
that each moment may be lived
in the presence of the Christ Child,
the lamb of Calvary,
the Saviour of the world,
and to your glory.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:
Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever.
Amen

READING

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He 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, ³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

³⁴'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

³⁵The 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. ³⁶Even 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.'

³⁸ 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

MESSAGE

God asked something of Mary, and Mary said yes. In a nutshell, that's what we read from the Gospel according to Luke this morning.

God asked something of Mary, and Mary said yes. But in that one, short, sentence, in that one event, lies a lifetime of change...

We know this story so well, that there is a good chance of us reading *over* the details without realising exactly what consequences that conversation had for Mary.

Let me try to explain this to you in a different way: When we woke up on Thursday morning, the world was covered in a dusting of snow. When we woke up on Friday morning, everything was covered with a good few inches of the cold white stuff.

It made for a pretty picture. One that often ends up on the front of Christmas cards:



But although the snow was really lovely to look at, we all know that *that* pretty picture is NOT the whole picture!

Because on that Christmas card you don't see the huge blister I had on my hand after clearing the snow from our drive; or the frustration people, who had to be at work early in the morning, had, trying to clear the snow off their cars... Or the watery, muddy mess I had to clean up in the house after the boys had a snowball fight and dumped their wet boots and waterproofs all over the floor as they rushed out to school; not to even mention the chaos on the roads as buses and cars got stuck where the roads weren't gritted; and I've even heard that quite a few people fell because it was so very slippery outside...

See what I mean? That pretty picture doesn't tell the whole story!

But please don't think for a minute that any of these hassles will ever put *me* off from liking the snow – I LOVE it!

But let me get back to the point I was making: The exact same thing is true for Mary's story. We very often see a perfect picture of Mary and baby Jesus portrayed on Christmas cards:



Where even the lambs and birds lovingly admire the beautiful mother and babe, but I can guarantee you that this picture, the picture we have

in our heads of Mary as she became the mother of the Saviour of the world, is no different from the snowy Christmas card I showed you first.

There are so many things we *don't* see in this picture. Mary wasn't a perfect young woman in a perfect situation... No...

In our culture she would actually still be seen as a child, probably around 14 years of age (the time young girls would get ready for marriage in the 1st century Mediterranean world), and she was scared.

You don't see the fear in her eyes on Christmas Cards, and that's probably because we romanticised the story so much. And *that's* probably because not even the fear in her eyes could ever change the amazing consequences this event had in OUR lives...

But before we look at *our* lives, let's have a wee look at what all this meant for Mary. Because in these few verses we read together, there are much more than meets the eye...

We are indebted to Luke for giving us a glimpse into the life of Mary. If you read through the gospels, you will realise that Luke is the only one who ever focuses on the marginalised, the outcasts, the women... Like all the other authors of their time, the others focus on the main characters, the important people, the men; but thanks to Luke, we get to meet Mary personally too...

Our story starts with a reference to the date and time. If we had to give an account like this today, we would probably start off with something like: 6 December 2020, 10am/11:30am, West Kirk of Calder/Polbeth

Harwood Church, West Calder/Polbeth, West Lothian, Scotland. But Luke says: “In the sixth month.”

This was the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary’s, and years after she’s given up the hope of having a child, she is now expecting a baby. Something *impossible* happened to her – and this is what the angel is using as example to explain to Mary, to maybe even *prove* to Mary, that *nothing* is impossible for God.

Then we hear about the next impossible thing: An angel appeared to Mary.

And I’m not referring here to the fact that an angel appeared, because that happened every now and again in those days, that is how God sometimes spoke to his people. The impossibility here lies in the fact that the angel appeared to *Mary*.

A young girl! Angels appeared to important MEN – priests, prophets, but not insignificant people, and most certainly not females!

To make it even more impossible, is the fact that she was in Galilee – a place the Jews regarded as unholy, because lots of Gentiles lived there too.

And now this angel calls her “highly favoured”. That was unheard of.

But THAT was nothing in comparison to what the angel told her! She was going to give birth to the Son of God.

She had a fiancée, Joseph, and I'm sure like any young girl she dreamt of her wedding day and her live with Joseph, about having a family one day...

But expecting a baby before you were married in those days only meant one thing – you would be shunned from your family for dragging the family name through the mud.

Being someone's fiancée was just as binding as being their spouse, and Joseph had every right to leave her – which meant that she would probably *never* find a husband to take care of her and her baby.

God's plan would cover all these issues, of course, but in that instant Mary didn't KNOW that.

Her uncomplicated young life all of a sudden got terribly complicated! Yet – she said YES.

She believed in God. She trusted in God. She knew it was going to be hard (*How* hard she would only really find out later when her son had to die on a cross...)

So she said yes, and in that moment, unbeknown to her, she changed the world. She changed the lives of thousands of people for thousands of years to come... Including ours.

But she did more than that. She taught us a lesson, a lesson in how to respond when God asks you to do something...

When God asks us to do something, we should say yes. And we should do it straight away. And *mean* it.

We shouldn't first try to weigh up the pro's and con's, look at our schedules to see if we have the time, look at our skillset to figure out if we have the ability, or even just ask ourselves whether we really WANT to do it...

NO. If God asks you to do something, you say yes, and do it!

Even if it is really hard. You don't worry about the consequences and obstacles. Because if God asks you to do something, he will be there alongside you all the way... If there is no room in the Inn, he'll show you a stable, so to speak.

Our *idea* of life and the *reality* we are living are very often 2 completely different things.

Especially at the moment!

Who would ever think that we would have to plan a Christmas holiday that only lasted 5 days, and where we are only allowed to meet with 2 other families?

All the people and the food and the shopping and the travel, the banter and the laughter and the cuddles and the family and friends we associate with Christmas – will probably NEVER be something we will ever take for granted again after Christmas 2020!

But in these unforeseen circumstances, in this unknown situation we are experiencing at the moment, God is still with us, and He wants to use us.

So let's stop focussing on all the things we are depressed and angry about, all the things we wish we were different, and make the most of what we have – because I can guarantee you that that is still way more than some other people around the world have, even since before Covid struck.

This year, this Christmas, let's *carry* our Christianity with pride, like Mary carried the baby Jesus:



Let's show the world that despite the fact that we can't understand why we've had to go through a year like this, we trust in God with all our hearts. Let's be his hands and feet in this time where so many people desperately need reassurance that they will be okay...

And let's listen to his voice – whether he sends an angel to talk to you, or shows you a neighbour in need; whether he speaks to you through the words in the Bible, or the mountains and trees outside – listen. Just listen. And say yes.

You never know how much that one wee word might be able to change the world.

Mary certainly didn't.

But because of her “yes”, we can now all look forward to eternal life with God. We can all experience the presence of God in our lives through his Spirit, every single moment of every day.

It is my prayer that every single one of you will be able to feel the love of God surround you this Christmas, despite our circumstances, and that you and your loved ones will have a MARY Christmas...

Amen

HYMN

CH4 279

Make way, make way, for Christ the King
In splendour arrives.

Fling wide the gates and welcome him
Into your lives.

Make way! (*Make way!*)

Make way! (*Make way!*)

For the King of kings!

(*For the King of kings!*)

Make way! (*Make way!*)

Make way! (*Make way!*)

And let his kingdom in!

He comes the broken hearts to heal,

The prisoners to free.

The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance,

The blind shall see.

Make way! (*Make way!*)

Make way! (*Make way!*)
For the King of kings!
(*For the King of kings!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
And let his kingdom in!

And those who mourn with heavy hearts,
Who weep and sigh;
With laughter, joy and royal crown
He'll beautify.

Make way! (*Make way!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
For the King of kings!
(*For the King of kings!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
And let his kingdom in!

We call you now to worship him
As Lord of all.
To have no other gods but him:
Their thrones must fall!
Make way! (*Make way!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)
For the King of kings!
(*For the King of kings!*)
Make way! (*Make way!*)

Make way! (*Make way!*)
And let his kingdom in!