

Morning worship from First Presbyterian Church of Magnolia, Arkansas
Sunday, December 17th, 2017

PRELUDE

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"

The Handbell Choir

After the Choral Call, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,

“Would you join me in reading responsively our call to worship, adapted from Mary’s Song in the first chapter of Luke and printed in our bulletins.”

CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Luke 1:47-55)

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For he has regarded the low estate of his servant & henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts & put down the mighty from their thrones,

He has exalted those of low degree and filled the hungry with good things,

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

And kept His promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.

Let us worship God beginning with the lighting of our third Advent Candle by the Smith family...

LIGHTING THE THIRD ADVENT CANDLE

The Smiths should be seated at the front, near the Advent wreath. There will be a lighter and a microphone on the wreath. As soon as they are introduced by the liturgist, Todd should pick up the microphone, pass the lighter to the person designated to light the candles, and begin reading.

READER 1: The past two Advent Sundays we considered the messages given by angels to Zechariah,

"Your prayer has been heard," and to Mary, "The Lord is with you." Today we turn our attention to Joseph, Mary's soon-to-be husband.

READER 2: Joseph had just discovered that Mary, his fiancée, was going to give birth to a child, and he knew that the baby wasn't his. While Joseph was sleeping, an angel came to reassure Joseph saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this was done to fulfill what had been promised by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

READER 3: When Joseph awoke from his dream, he did exactly as the angel had instructed. He married Mary and when the baby was born, he gave him the name Jesus. Since then, the name, Jesus, has brought deliverance to all who call upon the Lord. Today three Advent candles are lit representing three appearances of angels preceding the birth of Jesus.

READER 1: The first to Zechariah, "Your prayer has been heard."

(READER 4 lights the first purple candle.)

READER 2: The second to Mary, "The Lord is with you."

(READER 4 lights the second purple candle)

READER 3: And today's message to Joseph, "He will save his people from their sins".

(READER 4 lights the third pink candle)

READER 4: Let us pray... O Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of life we have received. Make us strong so that these good tidings of great joy for all people may be spread far and wide. Grant that the meaning of this day will dawn on every heart. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Smiths will return to their usual seats in the congregation.

As soon as the candle lighters are finished, the liturgist should step back to the microphone and introduce the hymn..

Would all of you who are able please stand and join in singing our opening hymn, "What Child Is This?", #53 in our *Hymnals*.

The liturgist should step back from the lectern for the singing of the hymn.

*HYMN OF PRAISE

“What Child Is This?”

The Hymnal #53

After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...

*CALL TO CONFESSION

To confess our sins is to admit that we are less than perfect and subject to judgment of One who kept the requirements of the law perfectly. But God’s own Word tells us that Jesus came, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. In penitence and faith, let us confess our sins before God and one another using the prayer of confession as it is printed in our bulletins, pausing at its conclusion for a moment of silent prayer. Let us pray...

*PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We confess O God, that when you come upon us in unexpected ways, we want explanations; when we cannot control what happens, we are angry. Rather than delighting and taking part in your wondrous works, we react with resistance. You are a God of covenant who has always kept your promises, but we still doubt your faithfulness. Our lack of trust clouds our judgment with impossibilities. Help us to unbind our joy, so it may bubble up through our brokenness. Help us to turn from the darkness of our past toward the brightness of the future that is ours in Christ. Amen.

*SILENT CONFESSION *(Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.)*

*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON

God shows mercy on all who humble themselves and repent of their sin, bringing us out of darkness into the glorious light of forgiveness. Let us rejoice in God's gracious favor. Friends, believe the Good News!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*GLORIA PATRI

Hymnal #579

Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen, Amen.

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

“By the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.

After a few moments, liturgist will step into the lectern and say...

“At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord prepared for them by Pastor Mike.”

The liturgist will take a seat.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

(All Singing)

“God’s Magnifying Glasses”

Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;

Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;

Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.

Today’s call to worship began with the words, “My soul magnifies the LORD...” It was the beginning of a song of joy that Mary sang when the angel told her that she was going to be the mother of a baby-- Jesus!

Does any one here know what “magnify” means?

What is this? (Show them a magnifying glass.) What does it do?

Mary didn’t use a magnifying glass to make God bigger, so how did she do it?

(Show them a newspaper. Point to the Headline.) Who knows what this is? Why is it so much bigger than the rest of the story? (Because it is to get our attention so we don’t miss the news in the article.)

When Mary sang, it was as if she was writing a headline for a really important news story about the birth of Jesus and what God was doing.

How can we call the world’s attention to the good news that God loves us so much that He sent his son Jesus? By singing with joy-- making a joyful noise... by doing good... by caring for others... by talk-

ing to those who really need to hear the story of Jesus and the really good news of his love.

Close with prayer...

AN ADVENT VIDEO

“Joseph”

As the children leave, the Preacher will step to the pulpit and say,

Each Sunday of Advent we are using a short video produced by “The Skit Guys” to help introduce the morning message. This morning we will hear part of the story of the Nativity from the perspective of Joseph.

The Preacher will take a seat.

After the video, the liturgist will return to the lectern & say....

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

What we celebrate this season is the greatest offering of all time, the gift of Jesus to a world desperate for the peace, joy, hope, and redemption that He brought. May we give as generously as we have received so that all the world may know and receive the blessings of God’s grace. Let us continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings....

The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.

THE OFFERTORY **"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" - Jason D. Payne Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

***DOXOLOGY (In Unison)**

The Hymnal #592

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

***OFFERTORY PRAYER**

Let us pray... Our Father, you gave the best you had and that which was closest to your heart, Jesus, so that the weak might be made strong to overcome their temptations; so that those who live in grief and pain might find comfort; and so that those with tongues long silenced under the yoke of oppression might be loosed and lift up songs of grateful praise to you. Accept these gifts as our thanksgiving, and an expression of our concern for those still in need. Follow these offerings with your blessing that the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed may be filled with your goodness. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles’ Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

Invite the congregation to... “Be seated,” and take a seat.

SPECIAL MUSIC

"The Birthday of a King"

Dr. David DeSeguirant, Soloist

After the soloist finishes, the Liturgist will return to the pulpit & say....

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from the third chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, beginning at the fourteenth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 1018 of your pew bible.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.”

*The liturgist will take a seat on the chancel or with the congregation.
When the liturgist finishes, the preacher will step into the pulpit & say...*

Our second lesson this morning is taken from the first Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning at the twenty-sixth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page #887 in your pew bibles.

Listen once more for the word of God...

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her."

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

C: Our thanks be to God!

THE SERMON

“Mary, Christmas!”

A police officer pulled a guy over for speeding and had the following exchange:

Officer: May I see your driver's license?

Driver: I don't have one. I had it suspended when I got my 5th DWI.

Officer: May I see the owner's card for this vehicle?

Driver: It's not my car. I stole it.

Officer: The car is stolen?

Driver: That's right. But come to think of it, I think I saw the owner's card in the glove box when I was putting my gun in there.

Officer: There's a gun in the glove box?

Driver: Yes sir. That's where I put it after I shot and killed the woman who owns this car and stuffed her in the trunk.

Officer: There's a BODY in the TRUNK?!?!?

Driver: Yes, sir.

Hearing this, the officer immediately called his captain. The car was quickly surrounded by police, and the captain approached the driver to handle the tense situation:

Captain: Sir, can I see your license?

Driver: Sure. Here it is. It was valid.

Captain: Who's car is this?

Driver: It's mine, officer. Here's the registration.

Captain: Could you slowly open your glove box so I can see if there's a gun in it?

Driver: Yes, sir, but there's no gun in it. Sure enough, there was nothing in the glove box.

Captain: Would you mind opening your trunk? I was told you said there's a body in it.

Driver: No problem. The trunk was opened; no body.

Captain: I don't understand it. The officer who stopped you said you told him you didn't have a

license, stole the car, had a gun in the glovebox, and that there was a dead body in the trunk.

Driver: Yeah, I'll bet he told you I was speeding, too.

What would you think if you were that poor patrol officer? Would you think that you had had a mental break or believe that you were being gaslighted? Are you crazy or is someone just trying to make you crazy?

Mary must have felt that way too. Here's Mary, perhaps thinking of marriage, preparing for the big day, already pledged to be married to a man named Joe, dreaming of driving the family SUV, with kids arguing about who gets to sit in front of the camel, and you being the perfect, patient mom. Then an angel appeared.

This angel's entrance was not welcomed at all. And how did Mary feel about this visit? "Mary was greatly TROUBLED at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be."

All of sudden due to this angelic visitation, a huge crisis hits Mary's world, and her world changed dramatically. As you look into her world and ours, it appears there are many similarities between our world and the world of Mary's time and we feel greatly troubled. Almost everybody I know faces one kind of existential threat or another. Many people live under a financial threat-- one paycheck or two away from foreclosure or spending their golden years stocking shelves at WalMart.

Open the paper and somewhere another suicide bomber has struck, seemingly out of no where, ending or rearranging every life he touches. There's the threat from wildfires, epidemics, addictions, domestic violence, the Iranians, the North Koreans, even from Democrats and Republicans, or the deep state-- the list goes on and on. Just when you think you can get away for some peace, something happens

So you say, "Let's head to church." ... Six weeks ago a few dozen folks in Sutherland Springs, TX did that and trouble followed them right into God's own house.

Gabriel greeted this young girl Mary, as one who was favored by God. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

God's own messenger has come and brought you confirmation of certain facts of life that a lot of people reject outright or at least question at one time or another: that there is a God,... that you are specially chosen by God,... and that you are not just favored but "highly favored" by the God of the universe!

How many people would absolutely die for such recognition. Most of us would hear that as good news--- and think that God was going to bless us with the perfect job, the perfect family, the perfect church, the perfect home, the perfect LIFE! No stress, no worries.... just blessing upon blessing...

Being highly favored by God doesn't mean that. Just ask Mary, the highly favored young girl, who was greatly TROUBLED with that news.

Just fast forward a bit and you'll understand why-- she would conceive a child out of wedlock;... face the possibility of stoning;... face the pain on the face of the disappointed and confused man who loved her and was pledged to be her husband;... then being forced by the Roman emperor, to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because of a government census, to satisfy the order of a petty, faceless, Roman bureaucrat. Destined to become nothing more than a number!

Still later, this very son who would force her to put everything on the line, would himself be executed as a criminal-- another family scandal for this highly favored one of God. There would be no wealth, no recognition, no royal title for Mary. Just pain and heartbreak.

Doesn't sound much like being "highly favored" does it?

Perhaps this Christmas, like Mary, you too find it difficult to believe you are favored of God. Perhaps you have had a rough year, & feel misled, misguided, or even betrayed by the God who says he loves you. And you ask, "How can I be favored by God, loved by Him, with so much going wrong in my life?"

Listen again to today's passage from Paul in Ephesians 1:

"3 How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ. 4 Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. 5 His unchanging plan

has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.”

Can you hear the echo of Gabriel’s words to Mary in Paul’s word to the Ephesians and us? Do not be afraid for God has you in his hands, no matter what you may have to suffer thru now. You are chosen by God, your future is secure, it has always been so. And this fact has never changed. God has big plans for you, for good and not evil.

Choose to believe that! For me this is the best gift of Christmas, that God loves me, he is for me, he holds my future, the future does not hold me hostage, nor no terrorists, NOTHING can separate me from Him! OH, hear the words for you this Christmas “Don’t be afraid”!

For Mary, her trial of giving birth to a son, means a future where the world is blessed. His trial will mean that we who believe will never stand trial for our crimes before the Great Judge. Her Son’s name will be Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High, the Son of the God. Yes, through him the entire world can be saved. For God, in His infinite wisdom has a plan.

God knew of our need for a savior. God knew we needed the touch of His hand, His presence among us, relating to us on one hand, and yet able to save us on the other.

God knew there were times then and times now when the uncertainty and the severity of the events of world would overwhelm us. God knew that worldly kingdoms and powers would one day rise to overwhelm and over-power the innocent with their evil.

Mary pondered the ramifications of this Miracle - and what it meant to be highly favored by God. And after she had heard it all, and considered it all, do you know what she said?

“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

You see, I think Mary realized being chosen by God often meant not a decrease in life’s burdens and threats, but that there would be even greater challenges ahead. I guess you could say she was wise enough, even her at her tender age to know that blessings often come disguised, and may not look like a blessing at all when it arrives.

She could have said “no”. She could have rejected God’s invitation. It could have passed to some other girl. She could have said: “Gabe, you got the wrong Mary, the wrong address. Maybe you didn’t know that there is this other Mary just down the street-- she’s kinda like a virgin too...”

But she didn’t.

Because maybe, Mary knew that what makes Christmas is God’s desire to enter into the lives of ordinary people living in threat-filled world. And Christmas is also about the willingness and openness of ordinary people to let God in, trusting His favor and having faith that His blessing will work it all out for the young of us all, even if we can’t grasp it yet.

I wonder... can we understand, just a little, the impact Gabriel’s message had on Mary’s future, and the impact it has on our futures.

I wonder... can we understand, just a little, what it took for Mary to commit to the path she chose. I wonder - can we follow her lead, even in a small way. I wonder... do we really understand that being favored by God means God is with us, especially in the trials that are bound to come as a result of saying yes to God.

I wonder... I hope we can.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our Father, we give thanks that you have never forgotten us or abandoned us even when we forgot our promises and abandoned our commitments to you, to your church, and to each other. Even today, you lift up common, ordinary men and women to call your church back to faithfulness. Make us willing and able to be used by you, however you need us. If we must lead, help us to be leaders worthy of your name. And if we are called to follow, let us follow unquestioningly wherever you choose to lead us, remaining faithful to Christ regardless of the challenge. Help us to rely upon your promises, and to remember always that your power placed at our disposal is always greater than the task ahead of us.

When life assails us with the unexpected or brings worry and alarm, enable us to turn its upset into consolation, its anxiety into significant relief. Keep us ever faithful and ever looking forward to the day of

your return and our deliverance.

Finally, when our trees rest beside the curb; all the clearance sales and gift exchanges are done; and when the decorations put away for another year, may Christmas linger with us, even as you are beside us throughout the year, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray saying...

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, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand and join in singing our closing hymn, #27, "Gentle Mary Laid Her Child".

*HYMN OF DEDICATION
CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

"Gentle Mary Laid Her Child"

The Hymnal #27

Provision for Clerk
Declaration of Quorum
Opening Prayer

"We pray, God, for the decisions we face and the abilities you have given us. Grant us wisdom, patience with one another, and the strength of your love and conviction. Grant us your Spirit, help us in our deliberations and stir us to faithful action. Bless all these things for we offer them to be your vehicles of compassion, justice, grace and joy. Bind us together, that each one's choice may be for greater good. Let the mind of Christ be present among us so we learn to love each other as you love us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen."

Presentation of 2018 Budget

Presentation of Changes to the 2018 Pastor's Terms of Call

*THE BENEDICTION

May the God who never slumbers or sleeps watch over you and keep you ever faithful to the One who was, and is and is to come. Amen.

*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

"God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen"

God rest you merry, gentlemen, Let nothing you dismay.

Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day,

To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy; O tidings of comfort and joy.

*POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis