

December 30, 2012
“O Little Town Of Bethlehem”
Luke 1:26-55 NLT

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27 to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. 28 Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30 "Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you! 31 You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. 32 He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

34 Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. 36 What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God."

38 Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And then the angel left.

39 A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town 40 where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed. 43 What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me! 44 When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice! 45 You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

46 Mary responded,

"Oh, how I praise the Lord.

47 How I rejoice in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and now generation after generation
will call me blessed.

49 For he, the Mighty One, is holy,

and he has done great things for me.

50 His mercy goes on from generation to generation,
to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm does tremendous things!
How he scatters the proud and haughty ones!

52 He has taken princes from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.

53 He has satisfied the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 And how he has helped his servant Israel!
He has not forgotten his promise to be merciful.

55 For he promised our ancestors--Abraham and his children--
to be merciful to them forever."

I don't know if you read this story in Newsday, about people who were having problems with some of their neighbors and so they sent them a message through their Christmas decorations. They took Christmas lights and shape them into a hand with just the middle finger raised. The neighbors were furious, and I guess, not knowing what else to do, called the police. The police told them to take down the decorations. At first they refused, but when the police threatened to arrest them, they took the "decoration" down.

However, they later sued the police department, with the help of the ACLU. In court the judge ruled that the police had violated their right to free speech; and not only did they win the case, but they put the decorations back up, only this time they formed two hands with middle fingers raised.

So let me get this straight, nativity scenes are offensive, but obscenity scenes are not. Anyone see a double standard when it comes to the rights of free speech?

Our society doesn't really have answers for all the problems we are facing in our country today. Ironically, our society seems to do everything it can to undermine the only one who can help us, and that is Jesus Christ.

The birth of Christ and those associated with His birth, did not have it easy and it is still not easy bringing Christ to the world.

The prophet, Micah, tells us that the Christ would not be born in a stately and royal place in Jerusalem, but in a small village, Bethlehem, and among the insignificant clan of Judah.

About 700 years later, at the time of Christ birth, when Herod asked the Jewish leaders where the Messiah was to be born, they said, "Bethlehem," and quoted Micah.

Matthew 2:6 NLT

`O Bethlehem of Judah,
you are not just a lowly village in Judah,

for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.' "

O little town of Bethlehem, only a small village in Judah. Yet the Messiah will come from you. Isn't that just like God?

The story of Mary picks up on this theme. Mary was someone whom many would consider unexceptional. She was not a privileged socialite; she was a young peasant girl. She refers to herself as a servant in her magnificent song recorded by Luke. Yet God exalts her to a special place, as her cousin Elizabeth says to her, "You are blessed by God above all other women and your child is blessed."

As we read about her, Mary appears to be all alone. Ever notice that there are no references at all in Scripture to Mary's family? A few days after Gabriel appears to her, she travels all alone on a four or five day journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Then she stays with Elizabeth for the first 3 months of her pregnancy - a crucial time in a woman's pregnancy. Could it be that Elizabeth is her only relative?

Yes, Mary is alone. At this point in the story Joseph has not yet heard from Gabriel and, as a pregnant, unwed, young girl she was probably an outcast in her village; making her not only unexceptional, but unacceptable in her society. Yes, Mary is alone. Yet the loneliness of Mary becomes the home of God-with-us. For in the kingdom of God, the lonely know the companionship of God.

Mary found favor with God. However, God's favor would not mean everything would be easy for Mary. She would go through much pain. Yet all who believed in her Son would have eternal life. God's plan would be accomplished through her, but it would not be easy for her.

Don't let your difficult circumstances lead you to think that you have lost favor with God. Don't lose your hope or your peace. Wait patiently and prayerfully for God to work out His plan in your life. God will do what He promises, but it will not be easy.

Be faithful believing, as the angel said (Luke 1:37), "For nothing is impossible with God." And, if you faithfully believe you will confess with Mary in joy, faith, and submission that, "the Mighty One...has done great things for me." God really does love you and has a wonderful plan for you... trust Him. You may not be sure of what He is doing, but your future is secure in Him.

Many times Christians are guilty of the sin of doubting God's love for His children. Time and time again Christ's closest and dearest friends on this earth doubted His love for them. Think of the disciples in a boat, caught in a storm, causing the boat to take on water. In Mark 4:38 we read that: Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his

head on a cushion. Frantically they woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you even care that we are going to drown?"

How their accusation must have grieved the Lord! That was God Almighty in their boat! How could He not care? But whenever men take their eyes off the Lord and concentrate instead on their circumstances, doubt always takes over. Jesus was astounded! "How can you be afraid when I am with you? How can you question My love and care?"

We grieve Him too when we think He doesn't even care that we are going to drown. Maybe we doubt his love because of how negative we are about ourselves and what we think about ourselves or maybe it's because of the way people close to us or society in general have treated us.

The whole Christmas story, perhaps most of the Bible is about reversing the fortunes of those who don't count in society—not only the lonely, but the weak, the hungry, the oppressed, the outcasts, the hurting.

God seems to define Himself in terms of these hurting ones and weak ones whom He loves and with whom He chose to work in the world. That is, lowly servants, like Mary, like Elizabeth, who say: "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." - Luke 1:38 NLT

And there is the key, you must be willing to accept whatever He wants for you and you can, if you believe He is good and He is love, and wants only what is best for you.

The Advent message is a call to live out the implications of accepting a God who defines Himself in terms of the weak and oppressed, the empty and the alone, those on the outside, the vulnerable, the childlike.

We see through Mary, and not just Mary, but the shepherds, and even through a place like Bethlehem, that Jesus comes, not to the proud and powerful, but to the outcasts, the humble, those considered "last" on the social lists. Of course Jesus comes to all types of people, and that includes the ordinary. He comes to anyone with a heart humble enough to accept Him.

The powers of this world are not the powers that matter most, God is the great leveler of all human structures of power and importance. It is He who brings down the exalted and elevates the lowly. We are called to nothing less than to view the world the way God does, by ordering worth and value according to God's terms.

The message of Christmas is that God does some of his best work with powerless people whose lives are defined by the world as impossible! It is a message of salvation

to people who have come to a dead end in life. It is a message of hope that promises, that the “powers that be” really are no power at all, and that the only power worth believing in comes from God through the Holy Spirit to those who wait for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4-5).

Did you notice Mary didn't name Jesus; Joseph didn't name Jesus; the angel told them He was to be named Jesus, a name that means salvation. They were not told to call Him “Wise” even though He was the Wisdom of God; they were not told to call Him “Creator” even though by Him all things were made; they were not told to call Him “Warrior” even though He is the Lord of hosts. He is Jesus – Savior, all that we need.

It was God speaking through the prophet Isaiah Who said a virgin would be with child and He would be called Immanuel, meaning “God with us.”

As we enter a new year remember we have a Savior who is God with us...

God with us means He is not out of touch or out of reach, He is not a legend or a myth; God with us in truth, in mercy; knowable, loving, giving, caring, walking where we walk, crying our tears, knowing our pain, feeling our grief, bearing our sorrows, comforting those who mourn.

God with us—to believe in, to follow, to proclaim, to seek, to worship, to love, to cherish in 2013 and forever!