

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Paul's Commentary on Christmas

Romans 16:25-27

²⁵ Now to him who is able to strengthen you—

according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was veiled in silence for long ages past, ²⁶ but now has been revealed through the prophetic Scriptures and made known to all the Gentiles, in keeping with the command of the eternal God, resulting in the obedience of faith—

²⁷ to God, who alone is wise, be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Second Lesson from the book of Romans doesn't sound very "Christmassy," especially in comparison to the Gospel's story of the angel Gabriel coming to the Virgin Mary with the announcement that it was time for the Savior to be born and she would be his mother. But when you read them together, as we sort of did today, something interesting happens – at least it did to me. The Second Lesson starts to sound like a commentary on Christmas, which not only helps us better understand Mary's role in it but also how her story is our story too.

For instance, Paul began: "Now to him who is able to strengthen you" (Ro 16:25).

Do you think Mary needed strengthening? She was young, probably what we'd call a teenager. Engaged. And now face-to-face with an angel who said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). "Mary was greatly troubled at his words" (Lk 1:29), we are told. As in she cannot figure out why they are spoken to her. She is just Mary. Little, unassuming, insignificant Mary. Feeling like you maybe felt when the teacher unexpectedly called on you for the answer even though you weren't ready and weren't making eye contact, let alone raising your hand! Yikes!

So, yeah, Mary needed to be strengthened. How often do you need to be? How often does God bring something into your life that you weren't expecting and not ready for? Oh, I can think of at least one example ... we're all living it right now. "Greatly troubled." Perplexed. Depressed. Frustrated. "Afraid" (Lk 1:30). That's us too from time to time, maybe even right now.

"Now to him who is able to strengthen you – according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Ro 16:25), the lesson continues.

Paul called it "my gospel," the gospel that he proclaimed to the Gentiles; but it was Gabriel's gospel too. And he preached it too, this time to Mary. The very Word given to him by God to proclaim to her. That the Lord is with her. "Highly favored" her. And is giving her a son, his Son, "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32).

A couple things come to mind. First, that there are times when perhaps God's grace and favor don't feel like grace and favor. I'm sure Mary could have thought of a million other things she'd rather receive from God at that moment than a baby boy. This wasn't what she had planned. This wouldn't be easy, neither for her nor her future husband Joseph. Maybe not for you too. Everything from God is good and for good for you, his child. But it doesn't always seem so. Sometimes things just seem bad and the timing couldn't be worse. Really God? This? Now?

Which leads to the second thing that comes to mind. A question. Mary's question: "How will this be?" (Lk 1:34). Maybe you're asking it a lot lately. How can this be good? How can this work out? "How will this be?" But the proclamation of Jesus Christ tells you that "you [too] have found favor with God" (Lk 1:30) and he has graced you as well. With his adoption as his child in Baptism. And his Spirit in those same waters. Graced you with faith and his Word – all miracles, really, given to you. And there's more where all that came from! "For nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1:37). Gabriel said. Not even virgin births. Not certainly whatever it is that is impossible for you. Because if God has promised it, he will do it. For you.

Which is, in fact, what Paul said next: "Now to him who is able to strengthen you—according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was veiled in silence for long ages past, but now has been revealed through the prophetic Scriptures and made known to all the Gentiles..." (Ro 16:25-26).

In other words, God's not making this up on the fly! He is doing exactly what he has planned long ago. Like the angel Gabriel telling Mary that the prophecies and promises of old are about to be fulfilled: "You will conceive and give birth to a son... The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Lk 1:31-33). So yeah, Mary, your son, Jesus is that promised Son of David. A kingdom that is greater and more important, powerful and enduring than anything this world.

Boy, do we need to be reminded of that! When things in this world – and maybe things in your life – seem to be going from bad to worse, we need what Gabriel gave Mary: a reminder that this is not the first time things looked that way. "The prophetic Scriptures" (Ro 16:26), as Paul called them, tell us how from of old, there have always been times that seemed hopeless and in which all is lost, but God was always there, faithfully sticking to his plan, keeping his Word, and fulfilling his promises. Even if it took a long time, humanly speaking, it happened. Therefore, God's promises to you will be fulfilled too. For Mary's baby now sits on the throne of God's forever kingdom as your Savior. And he will do it.

"... in keeping with the command of the eternal God" (Ro 16:27), the Second Lesson continues.

In keeping with the command of the eternal God, Gabriel came and spoke to Mary. In keeping with the command of the eternal God, "the Holy Spirit [came upon her], and the power of the Most High [overshadowed her]. So [that] the holy one ... born [of her was]...the Son of God" (Lk 1:35). Just as in the beginning God commanded there be light and there was light. Just as Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb and he came out. Just as Jesus will call us out of our graves on the Last Day and we will be raised. The command of the eternal God, God's Word, always does what it says. For Mary. For you.

"...resulting in the obedience of faith" (Ro 16:26), Paul continues.

Just like with Mary, who responded to Gabriel with, "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled" (Lk 1:38). How could Mary say that? How could she so humbly agree to go through with it all? Only by the strengthening of the Gospel and its power working in her and providing what she needed. This wonderful statement of Mary is not a testimony to her but a testimony to God working in her.

And in you as well. That you worship God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; that you repent of your sins; that you confess the doctrines of the Creeds; etc is testimony to the Holy Spirit having conceived faith in you and its resulting obedience.

That sometimes we disobey is not evidence of the Word's weakness but testimony to the fact that sin still lives within us. But this just makes the grace of God and the favor we find with him all the more amazing. For he does not cast us off and reject us as our sin deserves. Instead, he keeps calling us back to him and his forgiveness. All because Gabriel's word, God's Word, to Mary was fulfilled in the holy one conceived in her.

That's why Paul could conclude his commentary on Christmas like this: "to God, who alone is wise, be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen" (Ro 16:27).

And we can too.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

M: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the burden of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

Advent Wreath Children's Messages (CWOS themes pp. 133,134)

12.20 We light four Advent candles, remembering Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Mary. He came to share our humanity.

Prayers of the Church

O God of all grace, thank you for strengthening us by the proclamation of Jesus Christ conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. Unleash the power of your Gospel in our hearts that even now during these uncertain times it would accomplish what you promise: the obedience of faith to the glory of Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High.

Receive our thanks on behalf of Ken Walski as this week he celebrates the 90 years you have granted him. Continue to be with him, providing for all his needs and sustaining him in the saving faith.

Compassionate Lord, behold in mercy all who are in any danger, trouble, sickness or need. [Hear our prayers, especially for _____].

Give health to our world. Give your blessing to the vaccines and their distribution and bring this pandemic to an end.

Comfort all who mourn, [especially we pray for _____,] and sustain them with a confident hope in the resurrection.

Into your hands, Father, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in our mercy; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:8-16

⁸“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. ¹⁰And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹¹and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“‘The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: ¹²When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. ¹⁵But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.’” +

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 favored! 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 favor 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 forever; 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. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God.”

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