

# An Advent Sermon for DaySpring

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“In a Nutshell”

Luke 1: 26-38

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I have seven pecan trees in my yard and this year the pecans are everywhere. It's a bumper crop. If anyone wants to come pick up pecans in my backyard, they're welcome to.

And if you do, take note of the wonderful lesson my pecans have to teach about the Bible. Did you know that pecans can teach you important things about how to handle The Scriptures?

Well, they can because a pecan has three parts to it...

The husk...

The shell...

And then the meat inside the shell.

All of them are important but you can only eat the meat, right? The husk... that green rubbery stuff is so important because it protects the pecan while it's becoming a pecan.

And the shell of course is so critical... without the shell... all the worms and birds would get to the pecan meat and leave none for the squirrels and us.

So the shell is a necessity... and so is the husk... and there's your lesson about scripture. Everyone got it?

The husk is the literal... the historical... the doctrinal approach we take with the Bible. It has to be there... it's a necessity in fact... but if you try to eat it... digest it... live on it... it's going to make you sick.

The shell is the moral... the ethical application of the scripture. It's very important. Without it, you'll never enjoy what is inside. But again, if you eat the shell of biblical morality, you'll not find one bit of nourishment.

You have to get to the meat... which is the personal... the relational. It is the mystical and allegorical knowing that happens when the inner meaning is discovered. And when that happens the life-giving meat of scripture fills you... That happens when this story becomes your story. (*The nut analogy is from the Church Fathers*)

And our gospel story today is a very important story to make your own. Oh, we can and should encounter it in other ways. Doctrinally... what's this saying about Jesus and his two natures?

And it's interesting and fun, at least to some of us, to think about the literal metaphysical stuff. What did Mary see? What was the angel Gabriel like?

And some of us might even have some fun with the Greek words here and the nuances that Luke might have us see. Or maybe wonder why Luke dates it carefully... or how he ever found out about it all.

We might focus on Mary's purity, her worthiness and willingness... the unique place in redemptive history that she occupies.

We could do all that and not be changed by this story... fed by it. The meat of it can feed you only if it becomes your story... and it should become your story. It's the gospel... in a nutshell.

There is a greeting... a message sent to Mary... to you. It's the Cliff Notes Gospel and it's on the first page of Luke's story. Here it is... **“Hello there... favored one... the Lord is with you. God favors you. Don't be afraid.”**

In Mark's story... it begins with "repent... there's a fire coming."

In John's it's a cosmic flirtation with the reader.

Matthew... Old Testament validation.

In Luke, it's a message and the message is, "**God favors you... God is with you... don't be afraid.**" Do you know that? Ever heard that deep and deep enough? I know there's plenty of reason not to believe it.

Your sin for starters... and you know you don't always please God... and you do need a Savior.

And there's all those sermons you heard along the way... that insinuated that God just is sick to death of human beings in general and maybe of you in particular. There's that... some bad teaching...

And then there's that loud voice inside you that's always suggesting and often screaming,

**"You aren't all that good... you aren't enough... you better get things right."**

And into that... the angel comes... the messenger comes saying, not just to Mary but to all of us, "**God favors you**" ... In case you'd never heard it... or have trouble believing it on Mondays... you are loved. That's what is in the heart of God and what is the heart of the gospel.

You are loved and you are not alone. The Lord is with you. Did you know that's where we get that little piece of liturgy we often use? Mike Parsons suggested it a number of years ago. The traditional wording from Ruth... from the Old Testament... was "**The Lord be with you.**" As in, "**... hope that happens.**"

I had us use that once and Mike suggested that as people of the New Testament we should use Gabriel's words to Mary, "**The Lord is with you.**" God is with you... there is nothing for you to do but to wake up to that and believe it and live from it.

Yes... there's a paradox and God is holy and beyond us... But the gospel in a nutshell is God is with us... Emmanuel. You can't get any closer to God than you already are. The journey is believing it... living from it.

**You are loved...**

**God is with you...**

**So don't be afraid...**

There is fear or there is love. It's that simple. There is the worldview and the Godview centered in fear or there is the one centered in love. And perfect love casts out fear. It's all through the Bible and all through the Christmas story. "**Fear not... fear not... fear not... fear not...**" will we ever finally hear it?

Will this ever be your story... or only Mary's?

It's got to be yours, too. Mary can't be the only one bearing Christ on the inside... which is the second part of Gabriel's message. "**The Son of God will be within you.**" God will grow within you. You're going to carry this.

There's a legend about this moment found in a noncanonical text... a writing that didn't make it into the Bible. There are a lot of those out there... things written about Jesus and his family. A lot of it's silly and makes Jesus look like one of the "Little Rascals." Some of the stories, however, hit some spiritual nail on the head... like the one about when Mary hears this announcement from Gabriel.

In that story, she is spinning. Not like a dancer... like a sewer. She's been off to a boarding school of sorts but has been sent home to work on... get this... the veil that is to be in the temple. Mary's part of that is the purple part. She's weaving the veil of the temple when Gabriel comes to say, "**Jesus... the Christ... is going to be within you.**"

Now it wasn't a new message all together...

They'd heard it before...

Prophets talking about having their hearts circumcised.

But it had never really taken.

God was in the temple... in that Holy of Holies... behind?????? the veil. And we know that in Jesus God rips the veil and does away with it.

The veil was protection, wasn't it? We didn't have to see God and maybe God couldn't see us. It was distance and though we've never needed it... we seem to always want it.

Adam and Eve in the Garden... hiding...

Moses going up the hill by himself to talk to God...

A bunch of priests... interceding and sacrificing...  
over and over and over.

A temple with a veil.

We like our distance... our barriers... and Mary was working on that. Weaving something to go in between her and God. Weaving like we all do... (is this your story, yet?) Weaving to get some distance... got to have a veil, don't you? Don't we?

What have you woven and woven with?

A lot of attitude... about how God isn't this or that... a cynical curtain veiling.

Some of you have hung curtains with the faces of everyone who's let you down along the way... and pictures of churches that haven't been perfect... and it justifies, you think, the distance you keep.

You've woven with your shame maybe... your past.

"I'm too bad to get too near."

Have you woven with church business, religious activity... or piety... lots of lingo about God that turns the reality of God into something bland and tired, and distances all of us from the sacred?

You've woven... there's a curtain. Maybe it's cross-stitched with words... words... ideas and doctrines about God who is on the other side of the curtain.

Some of you have a curtain that looks like a calendar... you've woven a busy life... and maybe it's just so God can't get to your heart.

The gospel, on the first page of Luke, is that Christ is to be born in you. You must carry this deep within you. It can't stay externalized... it can't remain in your head... or at the church house... or in moral code.... It has to begin deep within you.

**"How can this be?"** she asks... we ask.

**"How???** Curtain weaving is much easier... I know how to do that."

**"The Spirit will come upon you... that's how?"** This is something God does. Or at least God makes the first move. God breaks in upon us like with Mary... right in the middle of our lives.

There she is weaving and dreaming about Joseph and their picket-fence life and God is there... just like that. Like God is in your life... just like that. Interrupting your weaving and your best-laid plans because that's what God does.

God will not stay away.

God's intentions are announced. This scene... this story... is called the Annunciation... not the Invitation. **"You will be with child... not... we were wondering if you might apply to be the mother of the Messiah?"** Does Mary even have a choice? Have you ever really known God to ask? Can you think of a single biblical story where God puts it in those terms?

**"Jonah... would you mind moving to Nineveh as a missionary?"**

**"Moses, if you're not too attached to this shepherding thing, might you be interested in a career as a deliverer?"**

**“Mary... I’ve got this rather nutty notion and thought you might think it was a kick and want in on it.”** Does Mary even have an option?

In a way, no... God is moving in history and in her life... Life is happening, it just is, it just does. It never knocks politely at your door and says, **“Excuse me, would you mind dealing with this challenge?”**

**“Would you mind facing this predicament?”**

**“How about having this personality... what do you think?”**

**“This weakness... that strength... huh?”**

It rarely works that way... it seems like things just are the way they are, more often than not.

**“You will be with child.”**

**“Well, really, I’d rather not... we were going to wait a few years until the carpenter shop was up and running and besides, everyone will think I’ve slept around... since I am a virgin and all... thanks, but no thanks.”**

According to the story... Mary doesn’t have an option... about being Mary... the mother of Jesus. Any more than you have an option to be who you are and to face what you face. You control very little... you determine very little... you choose very little.

But still... Mary has a ‘yes’ to give. (B. Brown Taylor) **“May it be to me, as you have said.”** Or as the Beatles sang it, **“Let it be.”** Those are the “words of wisdom,” Mother Mary speaks to us. There is a yielding in her to what is... to her own reality and that is a very powerful thing... it’s a beautiful thing.

We waste a lot of life not “reverencing our own reality.” (R. Rhor). Wishing things would change and people would be easier and the world would cooperate. Praying to be different than what we are and praying that God might lead us down another path... give us some different lot.

We try to force life rather than offering our “yes” to what is.

Do you know the myth of Procrustes? *“He was a giant who had a bed in his house of a certain length, and when guests came to his house who were too short, he stretched them out to fit the bed and when they were too tall, he chopped off their legs to make them fit perfectly. Most of his guests died.”* (May, *Physicians of the Soul*, p. 42)

We’re dying. We have to make everything fit... rather than letting it be. And we waste a lot of life wishing for what isn’t... not accepting what is. Never yielding to the reality we have been given.

Mary says yes... says yes to what is and she says “yes” to God... **“Let it be.”** That’s the redemptive story in a nutshell.

Though God is acting and initiating, God is always looking for the “yielded one.” As Cameron Jorgenson said at Lectionary breakfast... “Mary may not have had a choice about what was going to happen to her, but the Divine is a pretty good search committee when it comes to finding the ones who will say yes.”

Mary did... **“Let it be.”** And Christmas takes place... and redemption is on. And Mary becomes for the world, the mother of God... the Theotokos... the God-bearer.

That’s her story... will it be yours? She agrees to bear the mystery of God in her... and into the world. Will you?

*(Note – the references and ideas about Mary weaving the veil and our own “weaving” to get distance from God, were inspired by Rowan Williams, in his book about praying with the icons of Mary, Ponder these Things)*