

Advent 4: On the Road to Revelation
December 20, 2020
The birth of Jesus revealed
based on Luke 1:26-38

When I was young, my mother used to tell me a story about a rabbi who had a dream. In the dream, he got the chance to see where the selfish and the givers end up. First, he saw where the selfish people were taken. He couldn't believe his eyes! It was a big, beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that no one was eating. He wondered why until he realized that a three-foot-long spoon was strapped to each of their arms. Without the ability to bend their elbows, they could not eat. So each one sat hungry at a table filled with food.

The rabbi was then led out of this room to the place where givers go. He couldn't understand what he was seeing! It was also a beautiful banquet hall where the tables were lavishly decorated, and the food was piled high. Just as in the other hall, a three-foot spoon was strapped to each person's arm, but there was a difference. Here the people sitting at the tables looked happy. He saw that in this room, each arm stretched out to reach the mouth of another. Here no one went hungry, because everyone could eat.

My mother told me givers get used to giving, but selfish people only understand taking, no matter where they live or how much they have. She said learning this lesson would serve me well in my service to God.

I grew up in Nazareth, where the houses are built on the steep sides of a hill. The location allows them to receive morning sunlight. The soil is good, and the rainfall is generous, so we are never without food. The weather is usually kind because of the hill's protection. However, with only one spring of water for the entire village, the town does not grow much. This suited me fine. Growing up I felt safe and secure.

My husband, Joseph, also grew up in Nazareth. He does not talk much, but his mind is always working. He is conscientious, faithful, and gentle. Joseph works as a carpenter. He is a thinker, and I am a planner, so we are a good match. And in case you're wondering, Joseph is a giver. I know this because in the sixth month of our betrothal something happened that changed our lives. Joseph was by my side every step of the way.

It was spring, a time when most of the rains had passed and the ground was green. It had been a busy day, and I was hunting for some privacy in the cooler evening air. I thought I heard the rumble of thunder, but the sky was clear. I was preoccupied, looking for storm clouds, when a voice broke the silence.

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

I turned around to see who called to me. No one was there, but I noticed that the light around me seemed to be shining brighter. The sun had already set, so it should have been darker.

I was confused. I closed my eyes and stumbled back a step. The voice came again.

“Don't be afraid, Mary.”

I opened my eyes. No one was there, but the light seemed even brighter. I took a small step forward, looking into the light in front of me. Slowly, the light shifted, and a figure began to form, growing in size as if walking toward me from a long distance. When the figure reached me, I felt dwarfed by its presence. When I finally gained enough courage to look up, I found an attentive face looking at me. In the same voice I had heard before, the figure said, “Mary.”

Then, unbelievably, an even stranger thing happened. From some place deep inside, I understood that this illuminated figure was an angel.

The angel said, “Do not be afraid,” and I suddenly realized I no longer was. The angel told me I had found favor with God. I had been chosen to conceive and bear a son.

The angel said, “You shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever! His kingdom will never end.”

I could feel my face growing warm and the blood pounding in my ears, but I did my best not to let the chaotic feelings rolling inside me sway me from my spot.

“I don’t think this is possible. I am a virgin. I am engaged but am not yet married.”

The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child to be born will be called holy, for he will be the Son of God. Go and visit your kinswoman Elizabeth. She is old and has been called barren, yet she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. See for yourself that nothing is impossible with God.”

I bowed my head, searching for how to respond, and that’s when it happened . . . the revelation. In that moment, I discovered I am also a giver. I whispered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Then the angel was gone, only a cloud blowing over the plains.

I have been on a road of revelation ever since. I have discovered things about myself I never knew. I remain watchful for what is yet to be revealed.

What about you?

Luke 1:26-38 NIV

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

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

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He 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, ³³ and 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?”

³⁵ The 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^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even 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.

On the Road to Revelation Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; **Luke 1:26-38**, 46-55

On Sunday afternoon, June 1st, 1975, Darrel Dore was on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Suddenly it wobbled, tipped to one side, and crashed into the sea. Darrell was trapped inside a room on the rig. As the rig sank deeper and

deeper into the sea the lights went out and the room began to fill with water. Thrashing about in the darkness, Darrel accidentally found a huge air bubble that was forming in the corner of the room. He thrust his head inside it. Then a horrifying thought sent a shiver down his spine. "I'm buried alive."

Darrell began to pray - out loud. As he did, something remarkable happened. He said later: "I found myself actually talking to Someone. Jesus was there with me. There was no illumination, nothing physical, but I sensed him - a comforting presence. He was real."

For the next 22 hours that Presence continued to comfort Darrel. But then the oxygen supply inside the bubble was giving out. Death was inevitable. It was just a matter of time.

Then a remarkable thing happened. Darrel saw a tiny star of light shimmering in the pitch-black water. Was it real? Or after 22 hours was he beginning to hallucinate? Darrel squinted his eyes. The light seemed to grow brighter. He squinted again. He wasn't hallucinating. The light was real. It was coming from a diver's helmet. Someone had found him. His 22 hour nightmare was over. Rescue had come. He was saved.

That true story is a remarkable illustration of what Christmas is all about. Sin has wobbled our world, tipped it to one side, and sent it crashing into the waters of spiritual disaster. Darkness is everywhere and the human race is hopelessly trapped. Everywhere we look it seems bad news is overwhelming good news. Life has become so comfortable, for so many, for so long that the fear of change and losing their contentedness, overwhelms some. Others in the world simply have more hopelessness, darkness, despair, increasing depression, with little belief that a light will appear. The road back to shalom in all its fullness seems simply out of reach. The human race is hopelessly trapped. There is no anticipation. Humankind is doomed to certain spiritual death as it seems God have given up on us.

People look to politics, economics, education, wealth, science and medicine for hope. But in so many places there is the struggle for power, wealth, and fame along with incompetence. It seems even nature is turning against us. And depression seems to be like a low grade fever all over the world. Could it be God is finally giving us up, to do what we want – even though it means our destruction? This has happened before – with the flood, the exile & punishment of some people, like when the ground opened up and swallowed those in rebellion.

People keep looking for salvation, calm life, safety, and solutions – all in the wrong places. But some people turn to their Creator. They pray in the words of the prophet Isaiah - "O Lord, you are angry and we are sinful, all of us have become unclean. Yet O Lord, you are our father. Save and deliver us." (Isaiah 64:5-8)

It's probable that many of the Jews of Jesus' time felt this way. The Roman conquerors were ruthless. They controlled everything. The religious establishment was looking out for itself – despite what was preached and taught.

So the people eagerly wanted the long awaited promised Messiah – but only on their terms – the restoration of the Jewish nation with the same power and glory David's and Solomon's reigns brought. They forgot that David's kingdom was built around warfare and causing other people to suffer. And Solomon oppressed people for public works, including Jews. But the people prayed, and they waited for the promise – the time of the Messiah, the time of the one who would inherit the throne of David and rule - in peace and power forever.

Then, when the night seemed darkest, some thing remarkable happened. A tiny spark of light appeared. An angel spoke to a young woman and told her that she would conceive and bear a son, and that son would be the Son of the Most High God - the Messiah.

And an angel told the man engaged to Mary, that though she was pregnant, he should go ahead and marry her - that her child was the

child of God. He listened and carried through. Joseph, saw, heard, heeded and believed.

The light was dim at first - but its spark could be seen in the cousin of Mary, Elizabeth, who, despite her youth & the fact that she had never been able to bear a child before, was suddenly pregnant. And Zachariah, had a fantastic story to tell when he was given back his voice.

The light was dim - but it brightened through the next weeks and months - at least for some who were looking for such a light. It appeared to them as a star in the sky - a star which they followed in the hope that it would lead them to the birthplace of the great king.

But for all the rest the light was still unseen, and even to those who had seen it, it still could be mistaken for nothing but a dream, the hallucination of a drowning man, a hope based on an illusion and wishful thinking.

Finally, on the night the baby was born and laid in a manger, the light appeared to certain poor shepherds who lay keeping their flocks, and an angel of the Lord appeared to them, & the glory of the Lord shone around them as the angel spoke, and said "Behold - I proclaim to you good news of a great joy, for today in David's city a Saviour has been born for you, He is the Messiah, the Lord you have waited for."

And so the nightmare of the human race came to an end. Rescue had come. Jesus, the Son of Yahweh God, has come down from heaven to save the human race, just as the diver had gone down to save Darrel Dore.

That is what Christmas is about. It's about salvation & shalom. It's about being on the road to revelation. It's seeing the light come into the world to deliver us from darkness & sin. It's our Creator coming to us, dwelling with us, and rescuing us from certain death.

We know better political parties and politicians, safety for children, world wide fair economic policies for all people— like the protesting farmers in India, and not just good but excellent

education systems can be very helpful in this world. We wish every person had the same health care their government leaders have. And we wish there were quick caring solutions for the millions of refugees, like the man who has spent \$15,000 dollars in trying, to get to Europe 10 times. That's desperation & determination. But beneath all that, and beyond all that, and within all that, the world needs the spiritual help and change that only the personal light of the Son of God brings to every person.

At this time of year, the days are short, the nights long. The darkness can be depressing. Especially when one sees in the darkness all that is wrong in our world: chaos; instability; continued conflict and war; the ever-present threat of terrorism; bulging prisons; an over-crowded inefficient court system; billionaires in a world where someone dies from starvation every time we take a breath; the detaining and torture of prisoners; child abuse; domestic violence; climbing divorce rates; broken relationships; and the list goes on and on.

Racism, selfishness, greed, and addictions are just a few more. Sin has definitely sent our world tipping and crashing. There is darkness everywhere. As much as we need and look forward to a coronavirus vaccine, it only solves one problem and maybe just temporarily.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. That is what we celebrate here today, the light that shines in the darkness, the light that the darkness cannot overcome. Even a small light can dispel a great darkness – even a tiny candle can drive darkness out of a large room. Jesus urges us to be his shining lights for this world as they see our good works, glorifying the Father in heaven. With willing spirits and faith, our Creator will show us the way. God's word to us is, "I am with you; do not be afraid."

As F. F. Bruce wrote about The Gospel of John, "Light and darkness are opposites, but they are not opposites of equal power. Light is stronger than darkness; darkness cannot prevail against it. Similarly darkness cannot overcome those who walk in the light (Jn 12:35)" (p. 34)

More often than we think, when life seems darkest, something remarkable happens. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world." The nightmare of the human race came to an end. Rescue comes. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." "Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." Jesus, shining with the light of God, came from heaven to save his Creation and the human race. This is Christmas.

Listen to the prophets reveal the Creator's message: Hear O house of David, the Lord himself will give you a sign, behold, a virgin is with child, and shall bear a son, and shall call him Emmanuel.

You, O Bethlehem, of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you, shall come forth for God, one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. He will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The Almighty declares, "Fear not!"

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined. For a child has been born to us. A son given to us. Authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named - Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is the first half of the Christmas story, the half we often neglect as we wrap gifts and cook and prepare our homes for Christmas day. This is the part of the story that goes beyond the manger, beyond the beauty of a new born child, beyond the peace of motherhood, the joy of shepherds, and the love of kindly strangers.

Four days from now on Christmas Eve we celebrate the birth of the one called Jesus - the one whose name means "God Saves".

His birth, his ministry, his very personhood, is summed up in the words of one his disciples and apostles, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life."

The other half of the Christmas Story is the Easter Story - the story of how beyond the manger - lies a cross and the empty tomb.

Let those who have ears listen, the King of Glory has entered in. Let those who have eyes see, darkness is illuminated. Help us get on to the Almighty's road of revelation. Lord Jesus, help us see, hear, believe and follow.

Today we celebrate the light of God that has come into the world, the Light of the World, Jesus Christ. If we let that light into our lives, the darkness around us cannot overpower us.

So let us pray: O Holy Child of Bethlehem, you are the light sent into our world. In you there is no darkness at all, for you are the Lamb, the light of the city of God. Come and cast out the darkness of our sin. Chase away our fears. Reveal your hope, power, truth, and love so that no one can deny who you are and what you expect of us. Shine in us and through us so that the entire world may know the saving fullness, wonder and revelation of your love. Amen.