

First Presbyterian Church
Salt Lake City, Utah

Pastor Steve Aeschbacher
December 20, 2020

Waiting for the King: Announcing the King

2 Sam 7:1-8, 11b, 16; Luke 1:26-38

Good morning! Here we are the fourth Sunday of Advent, just 4 days till Christmas Eve! Even in this weird, hard, dislocated year the joy of Christmas is sneaking up on us! There is no way to avoid it, this has been a hard year and a challenging Christmas season. We got a Christmas card the other day that really summed it up: It was just one sentence on a plain white background. It said: “Alright 2020, call your mom to pick you up!” We are all very done with 2020, aren’t we? But despite all of that, I hope you feel the joy of Christmas anyway. This has been a hectic week for me, but I still find a smile creeping up on my face. Yes, I’m smiling under here! Christmas reminds us of joy that overcomes our circumstances—joy that warms our hearts even when so many things are different this year. That joy is fueled by God’s love made flesh as Jesus. That is why we lit the fourth advent candle today—the candle of love.

Today we get a reminder that Christmas is not just a cute story about a baby. In fact, the real Christmas story isn’t very cute at all—that first Christmas was the furthest thing from a Hallmark card. Can you imagine giving birth among the animals? This was not a sterile environment! Yet that is where Christ chose to be born. Today our readings remind us of *who* arrived at Christmas. As we realize the *who* we are all ultimately faced with *how* we will respond to him. We are looking at the who of Christmas which leads us to the most important question we have to answer before God—how we will respond to him.

Our first reading is from the time of King David—Israel’s greatest king. It sets up this *who* of Christmas. This was about 850 years before Jesus was born. King David symbolized when Israel was at its best. He was a national hero, like George Washington and Abe Lincoln rolled into one. In today’s story David wants to build a temple for God and surprisingly, God’s answer is no. God was happy living in a tent among the people. God kind of goes all New Jersey on David: You want to build *me* a house? No, I’ll build YOU a house! We are always trying to do things for God and ignoring what he is waiting to do for us. Don’t let your agenda

for God keep you from enjoying God's gifts to you! Look at this amazing promise that God gives David: he says I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, I will establish his kingdom, and that kingdom will endure forever!

God is promising that a descendant of David would be King forever! That's why people said God's messiah would be a descendant of David. So when people talked about the Messiah, they were mainly thinking about a great king, another David, who would restore Israel back to its glory days.

Fast forward to the time of Joseph and Mary. Here they were, 850 years later and Israel wasn't even a country! No king from David's line, no kingdom, they were just an occupied territory in the Roman Empire, ruled by a someone Rome appointed. It would be easy to think that God had forgotten about this ancient promise. There hadn't been a king from David's family for 600 years! Still God's people held onto hope. How could this promise ever be fulfilled? But then-- God sent an angel. All through the Bible story we get to places that seem impossible, and then we hear those two words: "But God . . ." Whenever you hear "But God" get prepared for a surprise! Our God acts! Our God changes things! Our God is able! We live by the flicker of hope, we are not overcome by the shadow of fear because Our God acts to help us!

That is exactly what happened to teenaged Mary one day—suddenly, there was someone with a surprising message for her. "Greetings, the Lord is with you!" Imagine a poor, working class teen in a hick town of a backwater province getting that message—from an angel! Gabriel goes on to say what maybe doesn't sound at first like good news at all—you are going to get pregnant and have a baby. Congratulations! Everyone will think you've cheated on your fiancée!

But then the angel says you will give birth to Jesus, who will be great, he will be called the son of God, the Lord will give him David's throne. He will rule forever and there will be no end to his kingdom! Suddenly all of these echoes of the ancient promises are ringing in Mary's head. Can it be? Is this really the time when God is keeping his promises at last? Is it finally happening!?

The angel not only echoed the old promise to David, but he added to it. This baby is not just a son of David, but also the son of God. This baby is not only fully human but also somehow from God himself! He will be king forever! With that appearance to Mary, Gabriel announced that God himself was moving into the neighborhood. He was choosing to be with us, living as one of us! No one had been expecting God to keep the old promise to David in this way!

The God who chooses to live among us--THAT is who we are waiting for as we approach Christmas. Not merely a cuddly baby, Christmas is announcing the coming—FINALLY—of the great king, the almighty one. Not just a king to bring back the good old days for Israel, but the true King who will put the whole world right. He is the ultimate power and authority in the universe!

As we think about our own Christmas celebrations, how can we honor THIS Jesus, the one who is so amazing that choirs of angels can't help but break into song when he is born? How do we respond to King Jesus? That is really the question of discipleship. How do we follow King Jesus, in our lives, today?

I want to share two examples of following Jesus with you. First is a woman from our former church in Washington I'll call Jane. When she was in her 60's she realized that God was calling her to move to Rwanda! She was not a missionary, not a minister, just a regular suburban lady, hearing God's call and following. She sold her house and most of her belongings and moved to Rwanda and started helping people. Soon she became friends with a young man named Alex who was helping street kids. They started a school. That school transformed hundreds of lives. Despite her lack of credentials as Jane followed Jesus' lead, she saw the fruit of changed lives. And all of this was after she was so called retirement age! If you aren't dead, you aren't done! If you aren't dead, you aren't done! In God's economy no one is too young or too old to have a valuable part to play in carrying out God's rescue mission. Of course, you don't have to travel to another country to follow Jesus. You can be a revolutionary right here, in your own job or your own neighborhood. The way you live and work impact people in ways you may never realize! Think about Linda Simpson from our own congregation and all of the students whose lives she shaped. She didn't shove her faith down anyone's throat, but it

shined out of everything she did. Wherever God calls you—follow! We never know where the journey will take us; we only know who we are traveling with! When I decided to start taking night classes in seminary while working at Microsoft I had no idea that I'd get to serve as interim pastor back at this church! I couldn't have planned getting here if I tried, but looking back God lead us every step.

Mary is our great role model for discipleship. She shows us how to respond to the incredible news of God's love for us—of Jesus moving into our neighborhood. Mary is curious, she asks questions, she asks "how can this be?" It seems impossible! The angel's answer is one we should put on our refrigerator doors and tape it on our dashboards and bathroom mirrors so we always remember it: "Nothing is impossible with God." Nothing is impossible with God! When you get to a place where it feels like a dead end—remember: nothing is impossible with God! Remember those times when He has been faithful to you in the past and say it fresh—nothing is impossible with God. Friends, not even 2020, not even COVID 19 can frustrate what God is doing! Who would have thought that we'd have most of us reading the whole New Testament together this fall? That is God at work—not just in spite of the pandemic, but even through it!

No matter what barriers you are facing—trust God, listen to his leading, and remember that nothing is impossible with God—not even moving to Rwanda to open a school at a time in life when most folks are moving to St George and playing golf! What is stopping you from doing what you know Jesus is calling you to?

After Mary is reminded that nothing is impossible with God, look at how she responds to the angel's flabbergasting news—she says "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me as you say." First—she recognizes her true role—she is the servant, not the ruler. Church, that is hard for us. The great poet Goethe said that the greatest act of faith is when a person finally decides that they are not God! Our greatest act of faith is giving up thinking we are really the boss of our lives. So much in our society tries to convince us that we are in charge, the masters of our fate. But that is an illusion, as any accident or pink slip or sudden illness reminds us. We are not in control! But we know who is! And we can trust him. What a privilege to realize that we are servants of the great King!

Mary recognized that she was God's servant, not a make-believe ruler. Then Mary says let it be as you say. Let the Lord's will be done in my life! Yes! That is the response of a disciple. That is how a Christ follower reacts to God's plans—I'm in! I don't know what the future holds, I can't understand how this will work out, but if God says GO, I'm GOING! The risk to Mary of this plan was huge—she could even have been killed for ending up pregnant out of wedlock. She didn't know what would happen. The author Fredrick Buechner says that Gabriel told her not to be afraid, even as he hoped that she wouldn't notice that beneath his great, golden wings he was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl. That is perhaps the most surprising thing of all about the whole Christmas story. God made himself vulnerable to whether Mary said yes.

Have you noticed that God always involves us in his plans? He could have come to earth in any spectacular way you can imagine. But instead he chose Mary. He chose to trust that this girl would say yes to his messy, humiliating plan of being born a baby and growing up like all of us. Jesus arrived through the cooperation of one of us. God always wants to work with us, not despite of us.

Mary's response of discipleship—let it be with me as you say—is exactly what Jesus shows us too. When he taught us to pray, he said we should pray that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you can make that personal—Lord—may your will be done in my life, in my heart, in my future. Let heaven come to earth, starting with your own heart. This is hard to do though isn't it? What if we constantly were asking God to reshape us—to shift our wants to HIS plan. Pray each day like Mary—let it be to me according to your word.

Dallas Willard said that discipleship is becoming the person that Jesus would be if he were you. Becoming the person that Jesus would be if he were you. God always chooses to partner with people, helping us grow closer to him and to become more of what we were made to be. All the way back in Genesis God made humans to be his stewards, his caretakers, and rulers for the world. That is still what he wants us to be—his under-stewards, carrying out his plan. God told Mary about his plan, and she said yes! She chose to cooperate with what God was doing. That is what disciples do.

Friends, our God is the same today. He still is at work and he still chooses to do his work in us and through us. And he still gives us the choice to say yes. Every day when we get up, we have the chance to say: Good morning Lord! Help me to live today in in step with your plan. Use me today. Surprise me today!

This year, even as Christmas feels different than usual, we all have the same choice that faced Mary that day with the angel. Will we say yes? Will we cooperate with what God is doing? Or will we try to do our own thing? Will we accept the gift that God is offering us, or will we ignore him?

At Christmas the great King is arriving. He changes everything. Each of us gets to decide how we'll respond to Him. He respects our choices. What will you do? Will you welcome the king or try to go your own way? Will you imitate Mary and say: let it be to me just as you say. Let's recommit to following Jesus this Christmas. Even if you can't see where he seems to be taking you, remember—nothing is impossible with God. Our God is trustworthy and keeps his promises. Following him takes some courage but ultimately with Him is the safest place for us to be!

Let's pray—Lord Jesus, we can't wait for you to arrive! Help us to see you in all of your glory and magnificence and not pretend you are just a doll in a manger. Help us to listen to ways that you are calling us into your work in the world. And help us to say yes to your call. Jesus, we are your servants, may it be unto us according to your word! Amen.