

I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is, that you have God’s favor. He has chosen you for a holy purpose. The bad news is, your life is about to become more complicated and painful than you can possibly comprehend. What do you think about that?

This is the basic gist of the message delivered by the angel Gabriel to Mary, who is learning here that she will become the mother of God’s own Son. The shocks multiply throughout their exchange. Shock Number One is that an angel shows up. Shock Number Two is that he speaks a discernable message. Shock Number Three is the content of that message. We don’t get a highly detailed description of Mary’s reaction, but we are told she was “greatly troubled” and was trying to discern what this was all about. I mean, of course she would be greatly troubled, who wouldn’t be? But she’s also very thoughtful throughout this exchange, in a way that serves as an example for us. So as we find ourselves on the cusp of Christmas, peering over the edge into the next couple celebratory days, let’s consider the parallels between our lives and Mary’s, and we prepare to join her in her journey to Bethlehem.

Now, Gabriel’s introduction is described in very plain language. There’s nothing flashy or mystical about it. We’re told Gabriel was sent to Nazareth and that he came to Mary. No blinding lights or trumpet blast. The focus is on his message, and verse 29 makes it quite clear that Mary was not troubled by Gabriel per se, but by “the saying.” What was the saying? “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” That ought to grab your attention, because Gabriel hasn’t said anything about having a baby yet. He has only proclaimed what you might call Gospel words. But Mary’s reaction is telling and rings true. She’s not comfortable with being thought of as favored by God, and the presence of God is also a concern.

Can you understand Mary’s cautious feelings? Have you had them yourself? When God’s good news is announced, the human heart can react in a number of ways, many of them falling into the category of “greatly troubled.” It is possible to hear that you have found favor with God and to doubt that it’s possible; to say to yourself, “I don’t deserve that;” to say to God, “I think you’ve got the wrong person.” That’s because we are so used to the idea of spiritual scorekeeping. At a basic level, the human mind thinks that God could only favor a person with a very good track record, and since I do not have one, that leaves me out of the discussion.

What Mary is told, God now tells to you, too. “Nothing is impossible with God!” In God’s hands, that which is ordinary becomes extraordinary and blessed. The Christmas message is for ordinary people, those who need life and salvation by grace. Salvation seems too good to be true. But remember Jesus’ response in Luke 18, when those who heard Him asked, “Well, then, who then can be saved?” Jesus replied, “What is impossible with you is possible with God.”

There is a temptation today to move away from Christmas grace. People today feel that they are extraordinary on their own terms. We live in a world of bravado, of arrogant pride. The Christmas message turns all of that upside down.

Mary stands as a timeless example of what a person becomes, by grace through faith. She was no person of false bravado, exactly the opposite. When Gabriel says, "Greetings, O favored one..." that's a statement, of, well, favor! God has chosen Mary. That's what grace is; God chooses His own, and His choices are often astonishing; if God were choosing a Kickball team, He would start with the smallest, weakest kid on the playground. And then, wins, with her, or with him.

You know, sadly, about this time of year, many people's nerves are frazzled. They struggle to buy the right gift or to get to that other party. By the end of the holidays, they actually need a vacation. Add to that the looming specter of war, economic uncertainty, and sadness because of separation from family or friends, and it's a lot.

But you see, that's the great gift underneath everything else, right into this world's mess, the true Savior is born, the One who will journey to the eternal punishment of Good Friday's Cross, so that all who believe in Him can have a new, eternal, resurrection life. And, when we open that gift by faith, joy upon joy, our ordinary lives can and do take on extraordinary significance in Christ's hands, now and forever!

Nothing is impossible with God for you, and that means the same faith that Mary had in God's promises, in God's Son, can be yours today, too, by the gift of His Holy Spirit. Simply by faith in Christ, all His gifts become yours!

Years ago, there was a wealthy man, who, along with his devoted son, shared a passion for art collecting. Priceless works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, and many others adorned the walls of the family estate. But the day came when war engulfed their nation, and the young man left to serve his country.

Only a few short weeks afterward, his widowed father received a telegram that his beloved son had been killed while carrying a fellow soldier to the medic.

Years passed, but the father struggled to move on. Finally, one Christmas morning, a knock came at the door of the old man's home, as he opened the door; he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man saying, "I was the friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. I came to give you this gift."

The old man unwrapped the package; the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of his son.

Though crudely crafted, the painting captured his son's look and personality. The father was overjoyed. It wasn't too long after that that the old man died.

His artwork *was to be* auctioned off. The day arrived and the art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. But, the first piece was no Picasso, no Monet, no Van Gogh; no, it was the marine's picture of his son, a painting that had brought joy back into the father's heart.

The auctioneer asked for the opening bid. The room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" No one bid. Complaints began to be heard about starting the auction with such a sub-par piece. But the auctioneer replied, "This one must sell first. Now, who will take the son?"

Finally, a simple man said, "I loved the boy, so I'd like to have it. I'll bid \$100."

The auctioneer said "I have a bid for \$100. Will anyone go higher?" After a long silence, the auctioneer said, "Going once. Going twice. Gone."

And the gavel fell. Cheers filled the room and someone said, "Now let's get on with it!" But the auctioneer looked at the audience and announced that the auction was over.

Stunned disbelief quieted the room. "What do you mean it's over? We didn't come here for a picture of some old guy's son. We came here for priceless works of art. We demand that you explain what's going on!"

The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son gets it all." Whoever takes the son gets it all.

Our Advent preparation has come to an end. The time is here! The presence of that Baby in the manger, that Man on the cross, that Savior, alive after dying, is God's *yes* to your life. Whoever takes the Son gets it all.

Mary had little to offer the Lord. That one of the reasons he chose her. With God nothing is impossible, and ordinary lives take on extraordinary significance in Him.

Mary would learn throughout her life that the baby she bore in the manger was not merely her Son, but God in the flesh, her Savior. She would hear hard words from this Boy. She would experience tremendous pain at His death on the cross, but ultimately, she would cherish Him as her Lord.

This Christmas, then, God the Father offers you the Gift of His Son. May your Advent repentance give way to Christmas faith in Jesus. May you see that the God, who so richly blessed a simple virgin girl named Mary, can bless your life with salvation, too, now and forever. For in Christ all things are possible.