

Mark D. Reichert

Advent 4 – Luke 1:26-38 – Christmas Is About Getting Gifts We Don't Deserve

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I wonder how many kids are sweating right now with only a little time left this year to jump from naughty to nice on Santa's list. I mean, all those stories and songs you hear on TV or in the mall tell you that what a child gets for Christmas depends on how they've behaved, right? Are you going to get a toy in your Christmas stocking, or a big pile of sticks, rocks, and coal?

But let's be serious. Nobody really only gets coal. I mean, there are loads of us who've probably been plenty naughty at times this year, but I don't think anyone's going to get charcoal under the tree unless you're planning on cooking dinner with it on your new grill. No matter how many elves are on the shelves watching if you've been bad or good, I doubt that even one child in our congregation is going to get a lump of sticks because their room isn't clean. No, there's going to be a whole lot of naughty people getting gifts that they really don't deserve.

And you know, the world has messed up Christmas in a lot of different ways. But this I think they got just right. Christmas is about getting gifts we don't deserve. And that's exactly God's point in our Gospel lesson for today.

It all started when God sent out his angel Gabriel to three surprising destinations: to *Nazareth*, a town in *Galilee*, to a virgin named *Mary*. As far as most people were concerned, Nazareth was just a backwoods town full of low-lives and shady characters. Nothing good could come from a place like that.

And Galilee? Just ask the religious superstars to the south in Jerusalem and Judea that looked down on the people up there in that northern region for their spiritual sloppiness. They'd say those people were a bunch of half-breeds that didn't know the first thing about how to really keep the Law or live like a good Jew should.

And then there was *Mary*... I mean, she *was* at least from the line of David, and that was a pretty big-time name in the history of Israel. But to them at this time, that name didn't carry a whole lot of weight in reality. See, the line of David hadn't been on the throne in Israel in almost 600 years. The Herods were in charge now, and only because the Romans put them there. This would be kind of like a waitress down at the local diner bragging about how her great-great-great grandfather was George Washington. Of course, there's certainly nothing wrong with being a waitress, that's a perfectly good way to provide for yourself and your family; but there's no arguing that it just doesn't come with the same kind of power and

prestige as the President of the United States of America. A lot of people might be tempted to think, wow, your family has really gone downhill.

See, in the eyes of the world, *Mary* was a nobody. She certainly didn't deserve the high honor of a special visit from an angel of God. But remember who even King David was before his call. He was just a lowly shepherd boy. Outwardly speaking, he had nothing going for him, just like *Mary*. When God made those great promises to him that we heard about in our first lesson, he didn't deserve any of them, and he knew it. But that's exactly the way our God works. He uses the weak and lowly things of this world to shame the strong and mighty, so that *we* can't flatter ourselves and *he* gets all the glory he deserves.

God sent his angel to that small, obscure town certainly not because there was anyone or anything there deserving of it. God sent his angel to *Mary* because he loved her and wanted to bless her – no other reason. He sent his angel *there* because he had a plan, and it was all about us getting gifts we don't deserve.

So all of the sudden this angel shows up out of nowhere in *Mary's* house, and like anyone who's ever had a surprise visit from a celestial being, she was understandably terrified. But the angel said, "*Don't be afraid, Mary, you've found favor with God. The Lord is with you.*" See, God didn't want to scare her or harm her; he wanted to shower her with his grace and favor. That's why he reached out to her, undeserving though she was. *Mary* found favor with God not because of who she was, but because of who He is; not because of *her* goodness, but because of *His* goodness. She found favor with God simply because God was looking to show it. He dropped it right in her lap.

See, Christmas was coming – and even though she didn't deserve it, God gave *Mary* the greatest gift ever. "*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*" The Lord promised here that he would be with *Mary* in a special way and with a special closeness. She would be blessed to bear in her own body Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior – her own Savior! – and to bring him into this world. He would be the fulfillment of all God's promises of salvation and all the hopes of his people since the beginning of time, and *Mary* would be blessed to be a vital part of that process.

*Mary* didn't deserve this gift, she knew that. And she didn't understand it, either – she knew that, too. But really, she didn't need to because she just trusted her Lord. *Mary* just received God's Word and believed, even though this would make her life so much harder. The fact is, this would have changed things dramatically for her and her future husband Joseph. Whatever life plans of their own they may have had were thrown out the window. And that's not even considering that in the public eye for the rest of her life *Mary* would be considered an adulteress who had a child out of wedlock. (I mean, what would you think if someone came up to you and

said, “The Holy Spirit conceived a child in me! It’s a miracle!” Probably not, right?) No, that’s something she would never live down, no matter how untrue it was. Talk about a gift with strings attached.

But Mary never for a second thought about returning it. This was a gift from God, so she trusted that it was good for her and best for God’s plans for this world, no matter how it might look at times. And that’s the way to receive gifts you don’t deserve – you just take them and be thankful. No, Mary didn’t doubt what the angel said. *What* wasn’t a problem for her; but she was curious about *how*. Virgins don’t just have children, after all. So she asked, “*How will this be?*”

And really, she didn’t get all that clear of an answer, did she? She just heard enough to know that it wasn’t up to her – it was all up to her God. “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*” As usual, God would take care of it in his own way and by his own power. She didn’t need to worry, because God would make it happen. However exactly it worked, that would be the holy Son of God growing inside her, because *nothing* is impossible with God and his Word can never fail.

Mary may not have understood all the ins and outs of the angel’s message, but that didn’t matter – God said it, so she believed it. “Okay, well... Whatever it is that you just said, whatever that’s supposed to mean – may it be fulfilled. I am the Lord’s servant,” she replied. And you know really, she didn’t have to understand it or rationalize it. Mary accepted her gift with thanks because she knew the heart of the Giver. That was enough, and in fact that was most important.

So my friends, how much of yourselves can you see in this story of Mary and the annunciation of Jesus’ birth? I mean, who are we, that God should reach out to us? Most of us are nothing special in the world’s eyes, and none of us deserve to be anything special in God’s eyes. God doesn’t owe us anything, nothing good at least – and yet God was also pleased to give us a gift we don’t deserve.

See, the gift that God gave to Mary was also meant for us. Jesus is also our Savior from sin and every evil; he’s our gracious, loving King who rules eternally with our best interests in mind. And God assures us that just as he worked through Mary to bring about humanity’s greatest gift, so also he can work through us to accomplish his will still today.

So we have the gifts, just like Mary... now do we have an attitude like Mary’s? Are we willing to bow to what God wants of us in humble faith? Or do we treat those gifts we don’t *deserve* as gifts we don’t really *want* – those health challenges, those personal losses, those government frustrations, and everything else we’ve had to put up with this year, even though God proves

again and again in our lives that he can and does deliver huge blessings to us even through the most challenging of them? Yes, the truth is, lots of times we have a pretty good idea of what God would prioritize for us to make it better match his plan for spiritual growth and service in our lives and in this world. We know what God wants from us and for us – it’s right here in his Word! But trouble comes when we let our sinful minds and senses overrule our believing hearts, or even worse, when we just... shrug.

But friends, we have the same God as Mary, the same gracious God who says to you and me, “*Don’t be afraid. The Lord is with you.*” We have the same promises and the same reasons to believe that when God works in our lives to accomplish his Will it’ll be a good thing for us, no matter how unpleasant or difficult or overwhelming or *long* it might seem sometimes.

And even if we don’t always understand the way God’s going to make it work, that’s okay, too. We also know the heart of the Giver, so like Mary, we just trust him. It’s like when I was younger and my aunt and uncle would give me cash bonds for my birthday and for Christmas. I didn’t really understand what they were, so I didn’t appreciate them as much as I should have; all I knew was that I was getting money that I couldn’t spend. But I knew those gifts must be a good thing because my parents always told me to make sure I specially thanked them. Years later I realized how right they were. That money ended up helping me get through school. See, just because I didn’t understand didn’t mean those gifts weren’t still good for me. Same goes for God’s gifts to us. We might not always understand them, but we can be thankful for them nonetheless because we know the heart of the Giver, who never hurts and always helps.

And you know, it’s okay to be curious sometimes like Mary was, just as long as your curiosity doesn’t lead you to doubt. There’s a world of difference between questioning to comprehend and clarify, and questioning to challenge and contradict. And if God says things that are simply too wonderful for us to know, if he just wants to give us gifts we can’t understand, that’s okay, too. Our God works in ways greater than we can imagine, and what was true then is still true now: nothing is impossible with God and his Word never fails. So until we reach eternity and God makes everything crystal clear for us, let’s just trust His promises: “*Don’t be afraid; the Lord is with you,*” and then with humble, confident faith, let’s say it with Mary: “*I am the Lord’s servant; May your word to me be fulfilled.*”

You know, my guess is this year, the children of Good Shepherd aren’t going to find any sticks, rocks, or coal under the tree – no matter how dirty their room is. Your spouse isn’t going to go without a present – even though they may not have been spouse of the year, for consecutive years running now. And you know what? That’s OK, because that’s grace and that’s how we reflect our Savior’s love in this world. And in fact, that’s exactly God’s point here. That first Christmas – and every Christmas – is about getting gifts we don’t deserve. Amen.