

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“God’s Grace and Presence” (Luke 1:26-38)**  
**December 20, 2020**  
**Dave Johnson**

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This gospel lesson for this Fourth Sunday of Advent recounts one of the most powerful moments not only in scripture but also in the history of the world, as the angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary to inform her that she will be the mother of the Son of God. Could you imagine? Mary was most likely a teenager from a poor family in a nondescript obscure small town called Nazareth...and yet God chose her. Why? Because of God’s grace and presence.

God’s grace and presence saturate today’s gospel passage, beginning with how the angel greeted Mary, “Greetings, highly favored one! The Lord is with you.” God’s grace—“Greetings, highly favored one” and God’s presence—“The Lord is with you.” Luke tells us Mary was “much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be”—and yet Gabriel reiterated God’s grace, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:26-30). And not only had Mary found favor with God, so had the world, and so had you, which is why Gabriel further told Mary:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:31-33).

Mary then asked a practical question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God...For nothing will be impossible with God” (35, 37). And how did Mary respond? Did she decline, “No, thanks.” Did she protest, “I’m just a nobody girl from a nowhere town?” No, she did the one thing it is always best to do when it comes to God’s grace and presence, she surrendered: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Some people decline God's grace and presence—deny that God even exists let alone actually cares about them or the little details in their lives, deny that God is with them even though God is very much present with them, closer than their own skin, because God has promised never to leave for forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Other people protest against God's grace and presence—and insist that Christianity is based on doing more good things than bad things so that at your death your good will outweigh the bad and you're get your ticket to heaven, even though scripture is crystal clear that it is only through God's grace that we are saved, apart from what we have or have not done (Ephesians 2:8-9).

And yet others, like Mary, simply surrender to God's grace and presence, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Take it from someone who at times has declined or protested God's grace and presence, Mary was absolutely right—surrender is definitely the best way to respond.

A couple weeks ago on NBC's *Christmas in Rockefeller Center* the legendary Dolly Parton performed an incredibly moving version of the beautiful and theologically loaded song "Mary Did You Know?"

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?  
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?  
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?  
This child that you delivered will soon deliver you

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would give sight to a blind man?  
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would calm the storm with his hand?  
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?  
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God?  
Mary, did you know?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?  
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?  
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?  
That sleeping child you're holding is the great, I Am?  
Mary, did you know?

We do not know how much of that Mary knew, but all of that indeed came to pass.

And as we will celebrate later this week, Mary did exactly what the angel Gabriel told her she would do, she gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And Mary gently nursed the infant savior, and Mary kissed his tiny hands and feet and admired the even tinier fingernails and toenails. Mary saw the baby Jesus' first smile and heard his first giggle, and was there when the toddler Jesus learned to walk—catching him as he stumbled.

And Mary remained in a close relationship with her son Jesus during his brief earthly life. When she and Joseph found the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple astonishing the teachers with his wisdom and then asking her and Joseph, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” scripture tells us she “treasured all these things in her heart.” Mary was there when Jesus performed his first miracle, turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and Mary instructed the servants, “Do whatever he (Jesus) tells you” (John 2:5)—in other words, surrender to God’s grace and presence.

And most importantly of all, Mary was there with Jesus on Good Friday. Mary was there as he carried his cross to Calvary, but this time when he stumbled she was forbidden to help him. Mary was there when the hands and feet she once kissed were nailed to the cross. Mary was there when Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Mary was there when some declined God’s grace and presence and protested against God’s grace and presence passed by, mocking her son as they did so. Mary remained right there.

Mary was there when Jesus, referring to John, told her, “Behold your son” and referring to Mary told John, “Behold your mother.” Mary was there when Jesus gasped, “I am thirsty” and was forbidden to give him even a sip of water. And yes, Mary was there when Jesus cried out, “It is finished” and then “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” and then breathed his final breath.

And I believe that yes, in that moment Mary did know that the child she delivered had indeed delivered her, and delivered the whole world—that yes, in that moment Mary did know that Jesus was indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—that yes, in that moment Mary did know that Jesus had always been exactly whom the angel Gabriel had told her and exactly what the centurion at the foot of the cross proclaimed, none other than the Son of God.

And I further believe that because of the unconditional love of God for the world, and for Mary, and for you, that Gabriel's words to Mary in today's gospel passage are God's words to you right now, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you...Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." The offer of God's grace and presence still stands, and always will.

My prayer for you today is that in response to God's grace and presence offered to you this very moment, you would simply surrender and echo Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.