

We all need a little peace in this stressed filled time of celebrating Christmas. Isn't it ironic that at this time of year, when we are celebrating Jesus the prince of peace, we don't have it? This is the time of year where we sing about peace, read about peace, see it on Christmas cards, and in social media. The world wants peace; we want inner peace, and we want peace with each other. If you're a follower of Jesus, you want God's peace; the peace that passes all understanding. Yet in our crazy, over-stressed, anxiety-filled lives peace seems to be a word that is unattainable.

It is the Advent season, which screams peace. Advent is nothing more than peace coming to us. Advent is coming into the pain, loss, fear, and hate and offering peace. God came into the midst of this hurting world. Why? To bring peace that comes from realizing we are not alone. We see this first glimmer of peace in the reaction of a young woman/child who chose to believe God at His word when her future seemed uncertain. She stood firm in her faith in God's Word and was at peace because she would carry peace incarnate.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 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 the Son of God. 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. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. Luke 1:26-38.

God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary in Nazareth.

Last week we heard about the angel Gabriel. He appeared to Zechariah and told him he would soon have a son. Yet Zechariah refused to believe, and as Mark Mitchell said, "the angel Gabriel pulled out the remote and hit the mute button, and Zechariah couldn't speak until his son John was born." This week Gabriel shows up again in Nazareth. Nazareth was a no-name town. You could say Nazareth was a small town with a bad reputation. In John 1:46 Philip told Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth and Nathanael's first response was, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

Luke then tells us Gabriel is in Nazareth to deliver a message to a young woman named Mary, who is engaged to Joseph. Engagement in this culture was very different than what you and I know of engagement. It was broken into three phases. Parents or a matchmaker would find a suitable match and then would take time to get to know one another and each other's families. If the match was approved, then they would enter into a formal agreement with a dowry. Once the contract was finalized, the couple would enter the second stage of betrothal. This lasted anywhere from a few months to a year. At this time, the couple was bound together as husband and wife and could only break the covenant through a writ of divorce. Although during this time, they did not live together and there was no sexual union. Mary was in this stage of engagement. She was waiting for the third part of the engagement which was the celebration of the vows and consummation of her marriage to Joseph.

So here we have Gabriel visiting Mary, and he said in v. 28, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." It's here that Gabriel greets Mary with words of grace. If we go back to the sermon last week, we might think Gabriel came to Zechariah because he was a priest living in Jerusalem. But here Gabriel comes to an unknown girl living in a town with a bad reputation. In her culture, she wasn't even old enough to matter, and God gave her His unmerited favor, His grace. She did nothing out of the ordinary to earn it. She was chosen solely out of God's grace. Gabriel then goes on to tell her about her future and who her son will be.

1. You will conceive and give birth to a son.

This would be wonderful news to any Jewish woman because it meant the family name and legacy would go on another generation with the hopeful outcome of the Messiah coming from their line. She was also instructed to name her son Jesus. A common

name at the time, and according to Matthew 1:21 "he will save his people from their sins."

2. He will be great and called the Son of the Most High.

Gabriel alluded to the message given to Zechariah about John being great but distinguished it by telling Mary her son would be the Son of God.

3. God will give him the throne of his father, David.

Jesus would be from the royal line of David. This comes from the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:8-13. Specifically verses 12 and 13,

"When your days are over, and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

4. He will be the long-expected Messiah.

This is the most amazing news. Mary would carry THE Messiah, THE King of Israel.

5. His kingdom will last forever

Another promise from God to David was that his ancestor, Jesus, HIS kingdom would last for eternity. Gabriel was telling Mary her son would be THAT VERY KING.

Mary responds in fear and wonder.

In the first part of this passage, we see Mary troubled by Gabriel's greeting. Like any normal person who might have an angel visit them, we see she was troubled. She was afraid. Gabriel responded, "Do not be afraid." I can just imagine Mary thinking to herself, "Don't be afraid?! There is an angel standing in front of me!" Not only was she afraid but she also wondered? Mary's reaction to Gabriel's message was very different than Zechariah. Zechariah doubted Gabriel, Mary wondered. Mary wondered what this greeting from Gabriel meant. Why would God find favor in this woman/child from a no-name town who really didn't matter in her culture? She wondered. Scholars estimate Mary to be about 14 during this time. I think of all my time in youth ministry and of the many 14-year-old Jr. High girls, I've had the joy and pain of working with, and I know very few who would have responded with Mary's wonder. I think today's 14-year-old girl would have got their phone out and tried to get a selfie with Gabriel! What does Mary do? She wonders.

Every year at graduation time I would tell our 8th graders, most of them 14, three things before they went to high school. 1. Be a person of character, 2. Shine the light of Jesus in your sphere of influence, and 3. Don't lose your wonder. It's about this age that the world hits us upside our head, and the wonder we used to have slowly slips away. It's a slow fade.

After Gabriel continued to tell her the future and who this baby would be, she wondered again. She wondered "How?" How will this happen since she was a virgin? This is a logical and biological question: "God, how are you going to do this?" Mary is an example of a wonder-filled faith. I think in her wonder she knew God was big enough to handle all that she would face. We could ask God the same question, "God how can I experience the life of Jesus within me?" Both are wonder-filled questions and both have to do with the Holy Spirit.

Gabriel responds to Mary's question

Gabriel tells her the Holy Spirit will overshadow her. Let's look at the proper use of this word "overshadow." To be clear, this was not a physical, sexual union with Mary and the Holy Spirit. Instead, we see throughout scripture how the Holy Spirit "overshadows." It's really a term describing God's presence.

We see it used in Genesis 1:2 as the Spirit hovers over the surface of the water in the creation account; Exodus 40:35 when Moses couldn't enter the tent of meeting until the cloud overshadowed it signaling God's presence. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that a cloud overshadowed Jesus, Peter, James, and John, and God spoke to them at the transfiguration. So, in the same sense, the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary. It would be supernatural. I love how Chuck Swindoll put it, "God the Father, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, would bring the Son into the world through Mary."

Just like Mary, through the Holy Spirit, we can experience the new life Jesus gives us through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.

- Jesus said in John 3:6, "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."
- Paul said, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body..."
- Romans 8:16 tells us "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

It's one of the many wonders of God, new life in Jesus. Because of Jesus, you can experience this wonder too. You can experience a new life in Him. Story after life-changing story gives testament to the life-giving truth of Jesus and it's a wonder! Do you wonder if God is big enough to handle your uncertain future?

Mary didn't ask for a sign but Gabriel ended his message with the news of Zechariah and Elizabeth and then ended with v. 37 "For no word from God will ever fail."

Now we get to the big picture in this story. You may even know the end of this story. Even though Mary was afraid and full of wonder, can you imagine what must have swirled through her head? In her fear and wondering, how could she feel peace? Mary was about to face some uncertain circumstances.

Think of your own life. Maybe you have some uncertain circumstances. Perhaps your job is in flux. Maybe your marriage

is coming to an end. Are you about to enter finals and you don't feel prepared? Maybe you are caring for aging parents, and your future and their future is uncertain. Perhaps you are thinking, this Christmas is NOT going to be picture perfect because of some uncertain circumstances, which give you cause to stress over an uncertain future. How do we find peace in uncertain circumstances? How did Mary find peace in her uncertain future?

Mary responds in surrender.

Mary's response was complete surrender. Look at v. 38. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." We don't see hesitation or doubt. All we see is a surrendered life to God. She called herself the "Lord's servant." Literally a bond-servant, someone who sells themselves into slavery. In other words, Mary willingly submitted herself to the unconditional service of God. What's impressive to me about Mary's response is that in her culture she could have been stoned to death for being pregnant before taking her vows. She could have been cast out of her community. Mary could have faced the same prospect that many women face today when unfaithful men abandon them, poverty. For sure she would be questioned about her pregnancy story, even Joseph questioned it. She had an uncertain future. Yet, because she had a surrendered life to God, she had peace with God's plan even when the future seemed uncertain because she believed God to be true to His word.

Notice Mary's courage, v. 37 "For no word from God will ever fail," gave her the courage to surrender. She surrendered to God even though it could cost her everything! She risked everything to be obedient. This is how faith responds to grace.

How about you? Could you respond like Mary? In a time and place where we have every moment of our life planned and often do not have peace in our lives because we are rushing from here to there, stressed about getting the perfect gifts, having the picture-perfect Christmas tree, and picture-perfect family Christmas card. Maybe you are stressed about how you can afford Christmas gifts as you live month to month wondering about your future living on the Peninsula. We can often forget the life-giving peace we have through our Lord, King, and Savior, Jesus. Through Jesus, we can have peace with God's plan even when the future seems uncertain because God is true to His word.

About this time three years ago, Dave Vergara, our Executive Pastor, and I were brainstorming a new role at CPC, a Communications Pastor. As Dave unfolded his vision for this role, I remember telling him, "You need someone who knows CPC well to do this role." At the time, I was into my 32nd year of Student Ministry, 16.5 of them at CPC. It's all I'd ever known most of my life, and I figured I would retire as a Student Ministry Pastor. I loved all of it! In my mind, my future was golden, doing what I loved most. Little did I know, God had a different plan.

Shortly after my conversation with Dave, I had my own encounter with the Lord, in the most spiritual place...the shower! I was in the shower thinking and praying about who would do this new role, and before I knew it, I heard the Lord say, "Why not you?" Well, my initial response wasn't like Mary's. I think I said, "Are you kidding? Lord, I'm almost 48. No one in their right mind changes careers in Silicon Valley at that age! And besides, what do I know about communications? So, what if I can communicate well to parents! That doesn't mean I can do this for a church with three campuses!"

For about two weeks I prayed and soaked myself in God's word. All I could think about was an uncertain future as a single woman approaching 50. I brought the subject up to Dave. Poor Dave, I'm balling in my office telling him what I thought the Lord was asking me to do. Dave's response validated the Lord's. He said, "Well Sandy, I've been praying that you would take this role!" Seriously? So he and I continued to pray, then it was time to talk with the good Dr. Mark Mitchell. So, Mark and Dave were in my office, and here again, I'm balling telling the story. Mark's response, "If God is calling you to this new role, I think you should do it!" During that time of prayer, spending extra time in the word, the Lord reminded me about something I always hammered into our student's heads; as followers of Jesus, our lives are not our own. It was a reminder to me that I'm committed to living a surrendered life in Jesus.

So, when you all ask me if I miss youth ministry, I'm so conflicted with my answer. Of course, I miss the kids and leaders, but the reality is, I'm doing what God has called me to do in the here and now because I want to say to Jesus, "I am your servant, use me however you see fit." It's because of Jesus; I can have peace with God's plan even when the future seems uncertain because God is true to His word. So, I followed God's lead. I fully trusted He had a plan. I fully trusted His word. And as I moved forward, I had complete peace about leaving everything I knew for the past 32 years to follow a new ministry path. My response may have taken a little longer than Mary's, but I do know this, Jesus, this baby she bore, is my Savior, my King, my Lord; whom I can trust with anything and everything and like Mary can have peace about an uncertain future because He is true to His word.

Mary's story is a beautiful reminder to all of us of what a surrendered life looks like. She saw herself as a servant of the Lord willingly offering up her entire life. Through the grace of God and His Word, she found true peace in her uncertain future.

How about you? Are you looking for peace this Christmas? Trust me, behind all of those picture-perfect Christmas cards we get from our friends and family we all know that not everything is perfect in that picture. Many of us are holding on tight to things that God wants us to let go of. What would it look like to let go and trust God at His Word, to receive the grace He offers and to know peace in your uncertain circumstance? What would it

look like to say "I'm the Lord's servant. May your word in me be fulfilled." What would it look like for you to surrender to God's plan for your life knowing you are not your own but were bought with a price?

God has invited each of us to respond to His love and His life, and He will prepare and enable us to do any task He asks. No matter what you are facing, no matter how uncertain your future looks, you can have deep, abiding, and eternal peace through Jesus. It's my prayer that we will all respond like Mary, "I'm the Lord's servant. May your word in me be fulfilled."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1435-2FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, December 9, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church.

www.cpc.org