

Read also Isaiah 43:1-7

Last year I wanted to do something very special for my husband on his birthday. I thought and thought, and finally decided to get him a new television. Ours was a tiny one which everyone complained about, old, with that that big old back sticking out. I wanted to get him a new flat back TV that would be great for watching sports. So a couple of months in advance I began shopping. But I wasn't certain about all that technology, so I asked my son to help. He knows all about the important letters, like 3D, LCD, LED, HDTV, you know what I mean.

So I quickly learned from my son that the 42" I picked out was highly inadequate. He convinced me to buy this HUGE TV, that came in an even larger box. It was a really good deal – black Friday. But my husband's birthday was a month away.

We cleared out my son's van and putting every seat down possible, it fit. Then I had to find a friend willing to store it for a month. In addition, on his birthday we wanted to set it up unbeknownst to him so it would be a HUGE surprise.

The day finally came. I don't know how to connect all that stuff. But lucky for me four of our six children were there. I had to get my husband out of the house long enough for them to pick up the TV, remove the old, set up the new, dust it, wire it, and plug it in. I would text them to check progress, because keeping my husband out shopping is a feat in itself.

But we did it! And boy was he surprised!

We had just as much fun giving that gift—planning it, buying it, hiding it, setting it up without him knowing it—as he did receiving it.

God, on a much larger scale, planned a gift for those He loves. The magnitude of God's gift is seldom understood and the joy of God in planning it, hiding it, setting it up – and of course, paying such a dear, dear cost for it. Several times He says in the Bible, *you wouldn't believe what I have planned for you* - all for love of you and me. All to help us be who we were created to be.

This morning we look at Mary's story. So I am going to ask Janet Stahl to tell it. (For those at home read Luke 1:26-38.)

So Mary, this young, humble, unassuming girl received a surprise visit from not just any angel, but the archangel of God, one of two named in the Bible. Gabriel had been exceedingly busy that year having to deal with human beings. First Zechariah, now Mary. He probably thought, *I sure hope this one goes better than last time!* If you remember, Zechariah was less than receptive to Gabriel's news.

Did you ever want to hear a word from God? Numerous people have reported visits from an angel engulfed in light, even today. And, people long to experience God in that way. Yet, the experience terrified both Mary and Zechariah; they were perplexed by his words; and Gabriel had to calm their fears.

“Do not be afraid,” Gabriel said. “The Lord is with you, Mary; for you have found favor with God.”

Gabriel's blessing does not indicate that Mary did something special to deserve it. She had no unique qualities or background or outstanding behavior. She wasn't a shining student or child of royalty. She was simply a young teen from an average family engaged to be married; a virgin. God had simply looked on her with loving care.

With God, there are no particular markers making one person more important than another. God has no partiality toward His children. He chooses an old man and a young girl; shepherds to sing with angels and kings to follow a star. Admins and farmers and executives and businessmen.

God sees us all as belonging; not worthy because of what we attain or accomplish or accumulate. In 2011, this is absolutely countercultural.

Being chosen is the last thing Mary would have expected, too. She is amazed to be blessed, and she ponders it. But there's hardly any time to think. She's told right away “the Lord will help you.” That is the meaning of “the Lord is with you.” It is divine assurance. *The Lord will help you do what you have been chosen to do.*

Every part of this conversation was covered in love. It's like God is bursting with this gift. He goes the second mile to help her understand and embrace it. God is thrilled for her to have it.

And the gift was a child. Not just any child; she would bear the Son of the Most High; a king; a fulfillment of all the Scripture with which she had been raised. She would give birth to the One for whom Israel had waited for hundreds of years.

At just the right time, God sent His gift to His people. God had said through Isaiah,

- “Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name.”
- “Don't be afraid: I'm with you. I'll round up all your scattered children.”
- “I want them back, every last one who bears my name, every man, woman, and child whom I created for my glory, yes, personally formed and made each one.”
- “I've paid a huge price for you.”

Mary would have known all those promises from Isaiah. So I'm wondering if she just embraced it – *It's God's plan; it's sure to happen!* Do you have that assurance in the promises of Scripture?

In your daily life are you confident that God is actively present, at work, fulfilling His hopeful plan? Jesus tells us, “My Father is always working, and so am I” (Jn 5:17). God has given a huge gift and He invites you to be a part of fulfilling it.

Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife said of Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that what the Lord has said to her would be accomplished” (Lk 1:45).

Mary had a concern, and she expressed it to Gabriel, How could a virgin have a child? That was impossible. The angel gave her every encouraging sign. He told about Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy. Nothing will be impossible to God.

The word for "will be impossible" is a future active indicative verb. That means "nothing will ever be impossible." No matter what the circumstances or our shortcomings, old or young, rich or poor, God is not limited.

In the course of that conversation Mary had to make up her mind. It was a fast decision. She was able to do it because she had a history of faith. She knew God's promises. She went to Sunday School and had been taught by good teachers like we have here at FPCD. She was probably cradled in a church nursery herself, and taught hymns of the faith. We know she knew God's promises well by the Magnificat, the song she sang, which you will hear in a few minutes.

So she wanted more than anything to be the bearer of God's gift. She kneeled. *Whatever you ask, I'll do*, she said. She laid down her own agenda. She died to herself and control of her own life. She received the gift. In doing so, she became who she was truly meant to be.

She accepted the gift forever. She committed to bearing Jesus, loving Jesus, protecting Him, nourishing Him, singing to Him, and teaching Him.

C. S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity* that whenever we surrender ourselves to God we find our true selves, but when we cling to our lives, we are dominated by our heredity, upbringing and surroundings. (*Mere Christianity*, p. 189)

Many people received gifts from God with this birth. God planned it so long; Jesus' birth was so important that gifts spilled out everywhere. The shepherds were given the gift of an angel chorus, through whom they were called to find and worship the baby. They were completely compelled to do it.

The wise men received the gift of an extraordinary star. It was such a great gift nothing could stop them from finding Him. They were called to bear gifts, which we will talk about this afternoon, at the Choir Christmas concert.

The call comes to us to love Jesus too, to honor Him, to worship Him and learn to follow Him. It is a gift and call to be here to represent Him in this community. Are you receiving the gift, like Mary, saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Mary did not say, "I'll obey you if you do things this way." Accepting the gift means we relinquish our own wishes, and join her in saying, "Let it be with me according to your word."

As Mary saw the reality of the miracles unfold first in Elizabeth, and then in her own pregnancy she began to realize the magnificence of the gift. She began to understand what it means to be lifted up and honored by God. She became who she was meant to be. She accomplished that through an unequivocal "YES" to God.

Are you receiving the gift?

Mary sang, "O how my soul praises the Lord . . ." (VIDEO of the Magnificat. For those at home:)

Luke 1:46-55 ⁴⁶ Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. ⁴⁷ How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! ⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. ⁵⁰ He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. ⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. ⁵² He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful.

⁵⁵ For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever."

AMEN