

“PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD - 3”
Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:46-55
Christmas Eve Morning, December 24, 2017

In his book, *Detours: Sometimes Rough Roads Lead to Right Places*, “Clark Cothern tells of a Christmas when his family encountered an unexpected house guest. A squirrel had fallen down their chimney into the wood burner stove in the basement of their Michigan home.

Cothern writes:

“I thought if it knew we were there to help, I could just reach in and gently lift it out. Nothing doing. As I reached in, it began scratching about like a squirrel overdosed on espresso.

“We finally managed to construct a cardboard box ‘cage’ complete with a large hole cut into one side, into which the squirrel waltzed right into when we placed the box against the wood burner's door. We let it out into the safety of our backyard.

“Later, I thought, *Isn't it funny how, before its redemption, our little visitor had frantically tried to bash its way out of its dark prison? It seemed that the harder it struggled in its own strength to get free, the more pain it caused itself. In the end, he simply had to wait patiently until one who was much bigger—one who could peer into his world—could carry him safely to that larger world where he really belonged.*

“That is what we need the Lord to do for us.”¹

It's as true for us today as it was in the day when Jesus came into the world. The world is in tough shape; there is so much corruption, and struggle for power, and political oppression, and hardship, and physical calamities, and threat of war. We need God's Salvation more than ever.

God has not forgotten us, however, but has already sent us His remedy to the situation. The Apostle Paul fills us in, as we read in Romans 16, telling us that the secret of God's Salvation has now been revealed to us as an answer to the people's cry and the fulfillment of the Prophet's foretelling. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come to the earth to bring release to the captive, sight to the blind, refreshment to the hungry and thirsty, healing to the crippled, and

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 243

hope to the outcast and displaced. He has come to bring hope to all those who have sought release from their struggles and trials. Jesus has come to set us free from the bondage we have with sin. And it is through Jesus that we are able to stand firm in our faith and live in ways that bring encouragement to the world as we touch the lives of those around us.

But living our faith is not always easy. Being faithful to the Lord our God can bring us into conflict with others who are not in faith, and we may be forced to endure hardships and trials because of our faith conflicting with others in our world. Even as we try to work in the integrity of Jesus Christ, others will not understand it, or they will be offended, or they will retaliate against us because we are living our faith that is vastly different than what the world expects or wants.

And as we live by faith, God **may** invite us to do strange, but wonderful things that will bring about His purpose and fulfill His Will and His Way. The Gospel lesson this morning gives us just one example of how God called a faithful woman into His service to bring about a marvelous work for Him. Among the many examples of faithful living in the Bible, we see that often we are called to do the unexpected to accomplish God's plan of Salvation for the world. So I invite you to hear the first part of our Gospel lesson today found in the words of Luke 2:26-38 (READ Luke 2:26-38).

Ok, it was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy that God sent the angel Gabriel to invite Mary to do a hard work for Him. Mary was an ancestor of King David, engaged to be married to another ancestor of King David, Joseph the carpenter. They were living in the small town of Nazareth in the north country of Israel. They were simple folks just like you and I, earning a living by working hard in their community, trying to stay alive among all of the persecution coming from the occupation of the Roman Empire. They didn't have all of the modern conveniences that we have, so life was hard and it took much just to survive.

They knew that the Lord had promised the coming of a Messiah, to save them and all of Israel from slavery, much like He did through Moses during the captivity in Egypt. They were

longing to be set free from the crushing burden of taxes and the demands of the Roman government. They prayed earnestly that the Lord would come save them so that they might find hope and life again as the chosen people of God.

They dreamed of the opportunities they would have to sing the songs of deliverance like Psalm 68, which says, *“God rises up and scatters His enemies. Those who hate Him run away in defeat. As smoke is blown away, so He drives them off; as wax melts in front of the fire, so do the wicked perish in God’s presence. But the righteous are glad and rejoice in His presence; they are happy and shout for joy. (68:1-3)”*

Or they dreamt of the words of Psalm 118 coming true, remembering how it says, *“Many enemies were around me; but I destroyed them by the power of the Lord! They were around me on every side; but I destroyed them by the power of the Lord! They swarmed around me like bees, but they burned out as quickly as a brush fire; by the power of the Lord I destroyed them. I was fiercely attacked and was being defeated, but the Lord helped me. The Lord makes me powerful and strong; He has saved me. (118:10-14)”* They longed for freedom. Oh, how wonderful it would be for God to send His Messiah to save them and release them from their bondage and oppression!

And then, right there in the small, little known town of Nazareth, the angel of the Lord, Gabriel comes with the dream of a lifetime! The Messiah was to be born, and Mary was the favored woman to be the human mother of the Son of God. Her faithfulness in following God’s ways caught God’s attention and she was offered the opportunity to do this great thing for the Lord. But this great thing would not be easy for Mary. It would challenge her faith to the maximum degree, even coming to the point of wondering if she could really do this thing that God had called her to do. She would face ridicule, belittling, scorn from family and friends, and even shunning from those in her community. She would even face the threat of divorce and possible death for being unfaithful to her engagement vows to Joseph.

But even though God was inviting Mary to become the mother of Jesus, she would not

have to bear this burden all by herself. Listen again to the words of the angel: “*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you... (Lk. 1:28).*” Now, when the Lord is with you, you have nothing to fear. Who is greater than the Lord our God? Who is more powerful than the Creator of the Universe? Who can overpower the One who formed the mountains and established the seas? Who can stand before the One whose breath shatters the cedars and spits the mountains and pushes the waters like tsunamis? When the Lord our God is with you, He has the power and the authority and the provision to fulfill His plan for you and bring everything to completion. When God invites us to do something, we have nothing to fear for He is with us.

And yet, Mary could have said “No!” She could have refused what the Lord God was calling her to do. Just like Jonah, she could have run away. Just like Elijah, she could have doubted that what the Lord was calling her to do would be possible. She did question how it was going to work, since she was not married nor had been in an intimate relationship with a man. But the angel Gabriel reassures her, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon 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...For nothing is impossible with God (1:35-37).*”

Instead of refusing to let God use her in this great plan of Salvation, Mary humbles herself to the will of the Lord God and accepts God’s call for her to be the mother of Jesus. “*May it be to me as you have said,*” she tells Gabriel. She understands that God will be with her, will protect her, and will use her in a mighty way to bring forth the completion of the Salvation of the world, through her. But let’s finish the Gospel lesson for today to see what happens then. (READ Luke 1:39-56)

Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth in order to seek support for the decision she has made to let God use her to bring the Messiah into the world. Though it would be a very unusual pregnancy and birth, Mary wants to get encouragement from the one who was called barren, but now is in her sixth month of pregnancy. God had done a marvelous thing in Elizabeth’s life to provide her with a child in her old age who was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Mary wants

to hang out with Elizabeth get support and guidance from her older cousin so that she might be faithful in what God was calling her to do.

Upon hearing Mary's greeting, the child growing in Elizabeth's womb leaps with excitement. This is John, who will become known as "the Baptist," leaping for joy in the presence of God's promised Messiah, his cousin Jesus. John is six months older than Jesus, but even before they were born, there is recognition of God's Son by John. And Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and blesses Mary with astounding words: "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished* (Lk. 1:42-45)."

Only then does Mary come to understand the greatness of the Lord God. Through the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knows the decision Mary has made to allow God to use her for this wonderful work. The older cousin now has the chance to be a blessing to her younger cousin in order to support her in the faith she has in the Lord God. And Mary is an encouragement to Elizabeth during the last days of her pregnancy, as she witnesses the blessing that the Lord has given to her.

And it is then that Mary echoes the words of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, as she dedicated Samuel into the Lord's service (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Hanna had eagerly sought the Lord to give her a child, and He responded by providing the next judge of Israel, Samuel. Mary's song, or *The Magnificat* as it's been titled, is so similar to the praise and adoration and honor that Hannah gave to the Lord for His touch on her life, counting her worthy to be His servant. And Mary realizes that there is nothing that is impossible with the Lord when people have faith in Him and follow His will and His ways. She comes to know that the Lord works through the meek and the lowly, the poor and the humble, the hungry and the obedient. God works through those who are faithful in their service and who trust Him in all their ways. God uses those who

submit to His greatness and allow Him to do a marvelous work through them, as they walk in His ways. Mary gives herself completely to the work of the Lord in this marvelous event of bringing Salvation to the world.

So what is it that the Lord is calling you to do? What difficult but wonderful thing has the Lord invited you to do? It might be as simple as receiving Jesus into your life as Savior and Lord. But it might be as difficult as living that faith before those around you who do not believe and are adamant in driving that faith out of you. It might be changing a job that has become such a burden in your life. Or it could be helping that neighbor that is in need. It might be putting your reputation on the line in standing up for Jesus and His Ways. It might be standing strong in the face of persecution even from your own family because of your faith in Jesus. It could be going on that mission trip that has been nagging you in the back of your mind for years. It could be opening your home to a foster child or friends having problems finding adequate housing.

No matter what it is, when God calls you to come into service for Him, it is important to remember that when He calls us, He will equip us, and strengthen us, and lead us, and support us to accomplish all that He has put before us. He does not expect us to even try to do it by ourselves. He has given us Jesus to be our Savior, the Messiah of all that holds us captive. He has given us His Holy Spirit to empower us to do all that has been given to us to do.

So how are we preparing the way for the Lord to come to us? Are we refusing His call in our life? Are we minimizing His power and authority to do that great thing in our lives? Are we just wasting away our time in useless living? Or are we seeking the counsel and encouragement of those faithful brothers and sisters around us? Are we humbly submitting ourselves to the work of the Lord, even though we may have doubts about it? Are we looking for the Lord's return so that we might find Him at work in our own lives?

Don't stop preparing the way of the Lord in your life, but let the Lord use you to accomplish His plan of Salvation for the world so that all may be set free from the oppression of sin. Prepare the way of the Lord, and trust in Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah of the World!

Let us pray: Father Your Will and Your Way can be scary at times, but when we trust in You to lead us and protect us, we can find peace to step out in faith to do the work you have for us to do. Give us such faith to be Your witnesses today in the midst of our world, to Your glory and through the guidance of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ; for it is in His name that we pray. AMEN.