

^p ***Straight from the "Hart"***

December 10, 2023 -- Advent - Peace

The Arrival – Prepare for Christmas Surprises



Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are glad you are here and participating in worship through this service script.

Opening Prayer

Lord we have gathered in your sanctuary on this second Sunday of Advent seeking your peace. You light our path. You are the source of all goodness throughout the earth. Come to us in this hour just as you come to us at all times and in all places and meet our deep need for your pure and peace-giving spirit. May our worship prepare us and others to receive anew the birth of the Christ Child and the birth of a new day in our lives. Amen.

Call to Worship (R – Reader, C – Congregation)

R: Some days our patience for God's promised new day runs thin. We look at our world and at our lives and we are perplexed.

C: Yet God is present with us.

L: Events fill us with fear. Fear of evil, or even fear of what God may do.

C: Yet God has favored us.

L: The reality of circumstances tend to be more complicated than we pretend them to be, leaving us confused. We are not always sure how to react and feel powerless to respond.

C: Yet if we remain committed to God, he may surprise us.

L: He will give us an inner comfort and confidence.

C: For his Son, the Prince of Peace has come, is coming, and will come again.

Music And as, in his time, he comes to us again this season, it is also time for us to come to him in worship. You may be seated as we all sing together, Come, Now is the Time to Worship.

Come, Now is the Time to Worship

Words and Music: Brian Doerksen Arr. David Shipps

© 1998 Vineyard Songs

Come, now is the time to worship.
Come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come, just as you are to worship.
Come, just as you are before your God. Come.
One day every tongue will confess you are God.
One day every knee will bow.
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
who gladly choose you now.
(Repeat all above)

One day every tongue will confess you are God.
One day every knee will bow.
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
who gladly choose you now.

Come, now is the time to worship.
Come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come, just as you are to worship.
Come, just as you are before your God. Come.
(Just as you are.) Come. (Just as you are.) Come. (Just as you are.) Come.

Christmas Affirmation Now join on this Christmas Affirmation that emphasizes peace, the theme of the second Sunday of Advent...

(P: Pastor, C: Congregation)

P: Do you believe in God?

C: We believe in God, the creator and giver of life, who brought all creation to birth, who mothers us and fathers us, protecting, nurturing, and cherishing us.

P: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

C: We believe in Jesus Christ: God born among us as a fragile baby, embodying both love and the need for love, and calling us to rest in God as trustingly as a tiny child.

P: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

C: We believe in the Holy Spirit, breathed into us at our birth, always drawing us on to be born again, encouraging, exhorting, comforting, nourishing our growth and inspiring our living.

P: Do you believe in God's salvation?

C: We believe in the reconciliation of the world to God, through Christ.

Hunted at birth and humiliated at death, Christ entered our fearful darkness so that we might enter his glorious light and share the life of his resurrection.

P: Do you believe in peace?

C: **And we believe that each new child is a glimpse of the face of God, a sign of the life to come, and a call to live in peace and celebrate living together. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth. Amen.**

(ad with questions and to be responsive)— written by Nathan Nettleton, 1999, incorporating some lines from "Midwife of our Lives" by Kathy Galloway published in *The Pattern of Our Days*, Posted on Nettleton's Laughingbird.net website.

Music Glory to God in the highest, or in Latin, and the hymn – Gloria in excelsis Deo. Let's sing Angels We Have Heard on High

Angels We Have Heard on High

Words: Trad French Carol, tr. Crown of Jesus, 1862

Music: Trad French Carol, arr Edward Shippen Barnes, 1937

harm. Austin C Lovelace, 1964 harm © Abingdon Press, 1964

1. Angels we have heard on high Sweetly singing o'er the plains;
And the mountains in reply, Echoing their joyous strains.
2. Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?
Say what may the tidings be Which inspire your heav'nly song?
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
3. Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing,
Come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King.
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
Gloria. Gloria. Gloria. Gloria.
4. See within a manger laid, Jesus, Lord of heav'n and earth!
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, with us sing our Savior's birth.
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
Glo--ria, in excelsis Deo!
Gloria.

Intro to and Bible Reading 1

Let's back up to the beginning of the story. While Herod was the ruling king of Judea, Zechariah belonged to a group of priests, and his wife Elizabeth also came

from the line of Aaron. God saw that they lived faithfully. They were not able to have children, and now they were both very old.

One day his priest group was fulfilling duties in the Temple. He was chosen to go in and burn incense on the altar while worshipers were outside praying. An angel appeared to him near the altar. He told him Elizabeth was going to have a child who would be called John. He would be a joy to his parents and to many people and important to the Lord. He will bring many people back to God and prepare the way for the Lord. He will have the same spirit and power as the prophet Elijah.



Zechariah, because of their old age, had his doubts, and wanted some sort of assurance that this would be true.

The angel replied that his name was Gabriel, that he serves the Lord, and he was sent to tell him this good news. But because Zachariah doubted his words, he would remain silent until after John was born.

Meanwhile, the worshipers outside were wondering why Zechariah was taking so long. When he finally came out, he could not speak to them, but tried to communicate through gestures, and they realized that he had had a vision. He went home. Elizabeth became pregnant, and she stayed home for 5 months, rejoicing in God's kindness to her.

(summary of Luke 1:5-25)

Now we pick up the story...

In the sixth month after Elizabeth had become pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. He was sent to a virgin. The girl was engaged to a man named Joseph. He came from the family line of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel greeted her and said, "The Lord has blessed you in a special way. He is with you." Mary was very upset because of his words. She wondered what kind of greeting this could be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary. God is very pleased with you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. You must call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king like his father David of long ago. The Son of the Most High God will rule forever over his people. They are from the family line of Jacob. That kingdom will never end."

Luke 1:26-33 (NIRV)

Music The angel announced to Mary what in not too long would be sung by all the angels – that heaven’s Christ was coming down to be born to Mary to bring salvation to humanity and invite them into his everlasting kingdom. Let’s sing Hark the Herald Angels Sing with King of Heaven mixed in...

Hark the Herald Angels Sing (with King of Heaven)

Words: Charles Wesley Music: Felix Mendelssohn

King of Heaven: Words and Music: Paul Baloche & Jason Ingram

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1. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.”
2. Hail, the heav’n born Prince of Peace, Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.”

King of heaven, come down; King of heaven, come now;
Let your glory reign, shining like the day, King of heaven, come;
King of heaven, rise up, who can stand against us;
You are strong to save, in your mighty name, King of heaven, come.
Oh ----- ; Oh -----;
3. Christ by highest heav’n adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold him come, Offspring of the virgin's womb:
Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king,
[solo: the new born king]

King of heaven, come down; King of heaven, come now;
Let your glory reign, shining like the day,
King of heaven, come;
King of heaven, rise up, who can stand against us;
You are strong to save, in your mighty name, King of heaven, come.

Advent Candles – Hope, Peace

Review

Because the king of heaven came down, --- and rose up, --- and will come again, Paul writes to Titus:

We are filled with hope, as we wait for the glorious return of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore, we relight the candle of hope. Titus 2:13 (CEV) [Pastor Relights Candle 1]

Bible Reading 2

Our hope is that as we let him rule, we can have peace with God and peace with each other for ---

He is the embodiment of our peace, *sent once and for all* to take down the great barrier of hatred and hostility that has divided us so that we can be one. He offered His body *on the sacrificial altar* to bring an end to the law's ordinances and dictations *that separated Jews from the outside nations*. *His desire was* to create in His body one new humanity from the two *opposing groups*, thus creating peace. *Effectively* the cross becomes God's means to kill off the hostility *once and for all* so that He is able to reconcile them both to God in this one new body. The Great Preacher of peace *and love* came for you, and *His voice* found those of you who were near and those who were far away. By Him both have access to the Father in one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14-18 (VOICE)

Poetic Reading

Now hear portions of this poetic writing that contrasts war and peace...

War and Peace

Man invents war. Man discovers peace.

He invents war from without.

He discovers peace from within.

War man throws. Peace man sows.

The smile of war is the flood of human blood.

The smile of peace is the love, below, above.

Peace is the whole truth that wishes to enrapture humanity.

War is the whole falsehood that wants to capture humanity.

Peace begins in the soul and ends in the heart.

War begins in the mind and ends in the body.

War forgets peace. Peace forgives war.

War is the death of the life human. Peace is the birth of the Life Divine.

....

Man seeks peace because his earthly existence desperately needs it.

Man welcomes peace because he feels
that in peace alone is his life of achievement and fulfilment.
Man spreads peace because he wants to transcend death.

....

The animal in man wants war for the sake of war,
war to devour the snoring world.
The divine in man wants peace for the sake of peace,
peace to feed the hungry world.

– Sri Chinmoy in “Songs of the Soul”

Prayer Let’s pray. Lord, we often think of peace as serene and calm circumstances. But the most important peace we have is the peace we have with you. Even though we warred against you with our sin, you made a way so that if we believe in Jesus’ sacrifice, it births in us a peace we can experience with you throughout this Christmas season and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.

Music Now lets’ sing the “Advent Light the Candle Song”

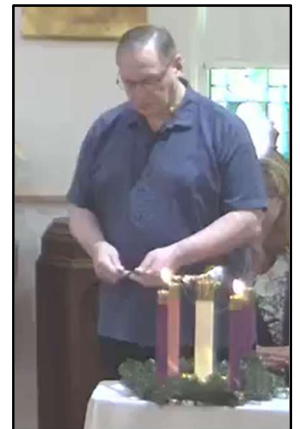
[Pastor lights Candle two during intro to song]

Advent Song (Light the Advent Candle)

Words - Music: Mary Lu Walker

© 1975 Mary Lu Walker

Light the advent candle, two;
think of humble shepherds, who
filled with wonder at the sight
of the child of Christmas night.
Candle, candle, burning bright,
shining in the cold winter night;
Candle, candle, burning bright,
fill our hearts with Christmas light.



Intro to and Bible Reading 3

Before we get to the humble shepherds, we need to hear more from modest Mary. The angel Gabriel had just told Mary that she would give birth to Jesus who will be the Son of God, an eternal king with an eternal kingdom. It seems that Mary, like Zachariah, has her doubts. It could be her doubts were of a different nature – his being disbelief, hers simply a lack understanding, or it could have been because of her youth, or perhaps some other reason, but Gabriel handles her questioning much differently than how he dealt with Zachariah.

Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For no promise of God can fail to be fulfilled.”

“I belong to the Lord, body and soul,” replied Mary, “let it happen as you say.” And at this the angel left her. Luke 1:34-36 (NLT) Luke 1:37-38 (PHILLIPS)

Music Most of the major players of the story saw angels and had to have their fear relieved before they could listen, or at least they were told to not be afraid – I’m not sure how effective those words were for them or would be for us in that kind of a setting. Nevertheless, let’s join the calming angels by singing of God’s loving presence with them, and with us when we are afraid... Let’s sing Fear Not.

Fear Not

Words and Music: Jeremy Johnson Paul Marino
arr. by Charlie Sinclair © 2010, arr. © 2013 Van Ness Press.

Fear not, Mary, this child you carry is the Savior.
Fear not, Joseph, you've been chosen for this journey.
Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.
Fear not, shepherds, the voices you've heard are the angels.
Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.
Fear not children, come before him.
Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.
Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.
God is with us, God is with us.

Music And the reason we can be calmed in our fears is because God is with us – by giving us his Son for Christmas, and through him our spirits are enriched and strengthened. Let’s prepare our hearts for prayer by singing Give Thanks...

Give Thanks

Words and Music: Henry Smith arr. by Lura Foster
© 1978 Integrity’s Hosanna! Music

Give thanks with a grateful heart; give thanks to the Holy One.
Give thanks because He’s given Jesus Christ, His Son.
(Repeat)

And now let the weak say, "I am strong;" Let the poor say, "I am rich,"
because of what the Lord has done for us.

(Repeat)
for us.

Give thanks with a grateful heart; give thanks to the Holy One.

Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.

(Repeat)
Give Thanks.

Prayers

Lord, we confess that it is easy to – not be thankful, and to be afraid, and to stray from the holiness of the day and concentrate on the abundance of to dos before us. As we put up and see the Christmas lights, may we be reminded of your light. Grant us the patience to pause in our task and bask in the promise of the star we follow. As we shop for gifts, keep us mindful of the birthday we celebrate and thankful for the gift we are given in the manger. As we decorate our homes, remind us to take time to share the treasured memories of love -- for it is your love that truly decorates our homes. This season of Advent leads us to the manger, where we find the child-king, where we find your purpose for our mission in seeing the purpose of this baby's mission for your world -- it leads us to leave the past behind and expectantly wait in hope for something new. But change is not something that is easy for most of us, so we ask for your peace in the waiting, and in the changing. Surround us and shelter us. Be the fertile soil out of which hope springs in its due time. And it is our hope and peace in you that leads us to pray for those in need around us.

Petition * Mary Jo Bell request prayers for her aunt Janet who had a mild heart attack yesterday and is being transferred to Traverse City today for a heart procedure. * The Godoniers request prayers for their cousin Kathie, having a medical procedure tomorrow, we continue to pray for * the Bells' neighbor's dad, Jerry Boldt, who fell and broke his hip, * for Pat Schleh's sister-in-law Marianne who is recovering from hip surgery. * Tom Spencer who has begun healing from a back injury. * for Carol Werner (Kathy Novak's mother) * for Jan Martin, who begins her second round of treatments tomorrow and is praying for the physical strength for her body to endure them and get the whole series completed this time, * for Joyce Vahala, * for peace in the world and in our lives, and for anyone who is suffering in the midst of violence or turmoil of *any* nature, * and finally for those we

have not named out loud but are still on our hearts and minds, we pause just briefly to lift these as well... [Silent Pause]

Now Lord, in perplexing and confusing times, as we wait for your dawning, equip us to labor on, love on, and serve your purposes until they be fulfilled in your time. We participate in your vision for your world as we live according to the words Christ taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Music It is in the coming of King Jesus to our world that leads us to the hope of last week, the peace of this week, and anticipating the joy of next week. If comfortable, let's stand before the reading and sermon and sing "Joy to the World"

Joy to the World

Words: Isaac Watts, 1719 Music: arr from GF Handel, 1741
arr. by Paul Marino © 2009 Van Ness Press

1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and heav'n and nature sing.
2. Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns; Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
3. No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found, Far as, far as the curse is found.
4. He rules the world with truth and grace And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness, And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love, And wonders, wonders of his love---

Intro to and Bible Reading 4

And on hearing from Gabriel the surprisingly wondrous news about herself and her relative Elizabeth, Mary didn't delay in visiting... and Elizabeth, seemingly having not yet heard of Mary's news, prophetically blesses Mary. Since the content of the blessing could have only come from a heavenly revelation, it reinforces, affirms, and encourages Mary about her miraculous news.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in Judea's hill country. There she entered Zechariah's home



and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby inside her jumped.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she called out, "God has blessed you more than other women. And blessed is the child you will have! But why is God so kind to me? Why has the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard the sound of your voice, the baby inside me jumped for joy. You are a woman God has blessed. You have believed that the Lord would keep his promises to you!"

Mary said, "My soul gives glory to the Lord. My spirit delights in God my Savior. He has taken note of me even though I am not considered important. From now on all people will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me. His name is holy. God will show his mercy forever and ever to those who worship and serve him. Luke 1:39-49 (NIRV) Luke 1:50 (NCV)

Sermon The Arrival: Prepare for Christmas Surprises

As a child riding in the back seat of a car looking out the back seat of the window. We were approaching what is now a major intersection filled with commercial things, but back then it was still a major intersection, but filled with big, huge yards with homes so far away you didn't even notice them. As we were approaching that major intersection in heavy traffic on the west side of Lansing, a child came out of one of those yards running full blast toward the street causing my mom to hit the brakes and swerve a little. He jerked to a stop right at the edge of the road like a running dog gets surprised as he gets caught at the end of the chain. Of course, there was no chain, he just stuck his chin up in the air and gave a wide-open smile. Apparently, it was a game he developed to surprise and scare drivers and possibly cause accidents, though I doubt that was in his mind -- he was probably too young to think about the possible consequences.

Our personalities vary as to how much we like to be surprised, or what kind of surprises we like to have. Some like to go to the movies and vicariously experience the rush of the serial killer leaping out in the dark. Others so much don't like surprises that they plan their own "surprise" birthday parties -- so they can't be caught off guard. Of course, they are not labeling their party for their preparation eliminates the surprise. Some people want to be surprised with their Christmas gifts, others make a list so they are sure their "surprise" will be a good one.

Today's sermon title "Prepare for Christmas Surprises" is an oxymoron, how can you be prepare to be surprised? In a British sitcom, the wife thought they were settling into a pretty inactive, boring routine of life and she wanted to have some activity. He protested that they had gone out to eat last week. She replied that was a month ago. He couldn't believe it. As they talked in bed that night, she said she wanted him to surprise him with something. He confessed he wasn't really the surprise kind of person. Nevertheless, he agreed he would surprise her once in a while. Then a few seconds later he burst out in a mountain like roar "RAAWWR!" and she screamed. Then he said he thought he'd just get the first one out of the way. Of course, he was just joking; and she knew that. Both woke up with a lot of stress. Him trying to come up with what would make a nice surprise, and her knowing a surprise was coming but stressed because she didn't know what or when it would be. She said the mutual stress was no good and to forget the whole idea. Of course, the others in the house heard the roar and found out the topic, and they convinced him that she really was bored and wasn't serious when she said to forget it. Eventually, with the help of friends and humorous setbacks, they managed to try and surprise her with a trip to Barbados. With everything arranged, they went to the airport only to find out that her passport had expired. They weren't quite prepared enough for the "surprise". (Although in those days in London, apparently, you could get your passport renewed quite easily and they got it the next day and went on the trip).

(As Time Goes By, "A Surprise for Jean" (S6:Ep 7)

It is impossible to be *completely* prepared, and it is also impossible to go through life without being surprised; even if it is the simple surprise of your toe discovering the corner of the bed leg that you were sure was at least another six inches away. Sometimes it is unexpected company at Christmas dinner. I've heard that is one reason some families make way too much food for holiday feasts is that they never know who is really going to show up. So they are always ready whether someone arrives or not. And depending upon the relationships you have, like unknown gifts, they can be great or disappointing, and sometimes you have to remember it was (hopefully) the thoughtful intent of the guests or the giver that counts.

And yet there is a way to be prepared, and yet surprised at the same time. We build our homes to code so that they are prepared for storms that surprise us when storms come, right? Hopefully we do. And hopefully we will never be surprised by how the house doesn't stand strong when a tree goes through the roof -- unexpected surprises still can get us....

Now let's get to our Bible story. Luke begins with some basic background needed for this

Perplexed... but he is present

angelic announcement. A relative is pregnant, an angel is sent, and young virgin Mary is engaged to a young man who, if traced back far enough, came from David's royal blood, but he himself is, or would become, a part of the construction trade in what was considered an insignificant town. They were struggling to get by.

By human standards -- then and now, natural logic would lead to expectations that the Creator of the Universe would speak in majestic, public, peals of powerful thunder (like he did when he gave the law at Sinai) rather than in a still, small, private voice (which he exhibited when he called Moses to lead his people). When a rabbi was asked why God spoke to Moses from the thorn bush, he answered, "To teach you that there is no place on earth where God's glory is not, not even in a humble thorn bush."

Likewise, when the time was ripe for the Messiah to come and usher in God's kingdom, the current expectation then would have been that if he sent his anointed king, he would be born in Rome to a noble power broker, (after all, even Moses was raised as a son in the Egyptian palace). Then in his adulthood, Christ's influence would have an immediate impact, backed by all the power of Rome. Or at the very least, or perhaps, even more likely, he would be born in Jerusalem, the religious and political center of his own people.

Mary is self-described as (depending on the translation) "not great", "lowly", "humble", "of poor degree", "of low estate", or as today's reading translated it: -- "I am not considered important." Given the cultural expectations, it is no surprise that Mary would be shocked, upset, (very perplexed) that God had taken note of her through this angel who greeted her.

Perhaps that is why the greeting began with one of the best comforts that can be given to a faithful person -- to be reminded that God is present and pleased with them. It reminds us that ***in perplexing times, God is present*** with us too -- and also that he often acts through less than ordinary people in less than ordinary times and places to do his extra-ordinary work.

I think of a human pyramid -- we sometimes see it in cheerleading. The one on the top gets all the attention as she climbs up or is sometimes catapulted to the top and then takes a flying leap and lands in the arms of those waiting below. But it is those who get so little attention on the rows below whose stable presence and strength that bears the weight - and the success - of those who are doing all those

acrobatics on top. Without them the whole thing collapses. In the same way, history is written by the victors, who name the ones on top, while the quiet, unnoticed workload is born by almost everyone else. Or if you want to put it to the players on the field, it is the players in the trenches -- on the lines; that make the stars shine. Without them, even the best quarterback can't make a pass, or a running back past the line of scrimmage. God knows who usually gets the real work of a faith, of a society, done. And it is through them, through the grass roots that he most often chooses to work.

But it is not just his presence – the angel tries to quell Mary's ***fears by telling her she was favored*** in God's

Fearful... but favored

eyes. God noticed Mary, was pleased with her, and he blessed her in a special way. Luke doesn't give us any back story of Mary prior to this, but these phrases make it clear the kind of young woman she was. Through an obvious life of devotion, she was, unbeknownst to her, becoming prepared, or better, God had been preparing her all her life for this Christmas surprise. It was Mary's faithful spiritual discipline and willingness to routinely listen and do what God wanted that had prepared her for this shocking experience with the angel. She was perplexed in her surprise, but at the same time prepared for God's presence. She was fearful of what all this might mean, but she was assured that she was favored.

After reassuring the terrified Mary, the angel shares God's work and purpose he intends to accomplish through her, and he talks about the Son of the Most High God that she would deliver to the world.

We may not know exactly what God may be preparing for us, or what he may be preparing us for -- through our spiritual disciplines and circumstances of life; but as Chris Tomlin once wrote in a song that we just began singing her not too long ago -- when he comes for us, we can't run from his presence, from his arms. Jesus, he loves us, and is *for* us. And knowing that it creates a fire in our soul so that we will never be same, we step out of the dark and into the light when he calls us to fill his purpose in our lives... (Chris Tomlin, in "Jesus, [He] Loves Me" – paraphrased)

It seems impossible to understand – (the news Mary received would throw any of us for a loop, even more so in our science-based world). so she asks how it is possible.

Confused... but committed

The original language tells us that Mary's "how" question is not a question of sarcasm, skepticism or disbelief. Perhaps this is how she differed from Zechariah, the question we raised in and reading introduction earlier. Zechariah's questions

sounded almost identical to Mary's, but Gabriel considered his words to be of disbelief. But the tone in the original language of Mary's words doesn't reveal that, nor does she demand a sign of proof. In the same sense as the hymn that asks the question, "How Can it Be?" Her question is primarily used in the sense of overwhelming awe and amazement. Secondly, there was a sense of science and next steps. (Would Joseph be involved? How will this play out?)

Gabriel doesn't get into the specifics of the science, but simply says that God's Spirit would work this miracle, and then, lest doubt does begin to spring into her head, he informs her that her relative Elizabeth who was considered unable to have a baby, was *already* pregnant. Mary and Elizabeth, one thought too pure to have a baby, and the other too old to have a baby -- yet God had already worked a miracle in Elizabeth, (and though it doesn't say it directly, there is an implication in the angel was encouraging her to go visit her) And because of what he had done in Elizabeth, there was no doubt God could work a miracle in her as well. For what God says happens - nothing is impossible. That is probably less specific than most of us would like, but it was enough for the trusting Mary.

Someone put it this way. Most children don't understand the physics of rotational inertia and balance and all the rest that keeps a person upright as they learn how to ride a bike, they just do it and trust that it will work, and it works – with practice.

Mary did what we should strive to do when our present is perplexing, frightening, and confusing; and our future is unknown. She reached deep into her soul and found courage that came from a place beyond her own self, beyond her own knowledge and limitations. She reaches beyond her uncertain circumstances to the stability of God's presence and power with her. And even if she was confuse, which it seems she certainly would be, she nevertheless restates her commitment to willingly serve God however he sees fit. Can we make such a commitment?

As I mentioned, it isn't clear in the English translation, but Gabriel's words to Mary

"Unimportant"... but encouraged

about Elizabeth contained an implication that she should visit her relative. So even though Mary didn't ask for a sign of proof, God was more than willing to give her that encouragement, which she received through Elizabeth's proclamation confirming everything the angel Gabriel had said in his blessing of Mary. And Elizabeth hadn't heard anything from anyone, so it must have come from heavenly revelation, from God. Mary replied with a long song of which we only captured the first few verses in which she acknowledges her insignificant cultural status, but her

heart felt joy that God noticed her and the great things he was going to do for her and how he always gives mercy to those who worship him.

If life feels fragile, unstable, if our situation is humbling and our schedule seems too busy, if our circuitry is hovering near overload and someone keeps stepping on our last nerve, be encouraged. Know, as many people have said, that courage is not an absence of feeling fear or frustration but moving forward in spite of it. Be encouraged -- be encouraged that when we are perplexed, he is present, when we are fearful, we are still favored, when we are confused, we can still be committed to him, and when we feel we are unimportant, he will encourage us -- we will sense God coming close to our life -- and in his timing, we may experience a "stable" time (a manger time) when Christ is born, or reborn in our hearts in fresh ways, and God may yet choose to do great things in us, and for those around us because of that.

Prayer Let's pray. Lord we long to be courageously obedient like Mary. In the most unusual of circumstances, Mary was willing to receive your Son physically into her womb. Grace us to be willing to receive Christ into our hearts again today. Like her, strengthen us to resist giving in to our perplexities, our fears, our confusion, our seeming lack of importance. Prepare us for the surprises of life that lie before us - - and teach us again that the most critical part of that preparation comes through worshiping you in awe and obedient love -- because you first loved us and came to be with us, to die for us, and to fill us with so much of your hope and peace and joy that our hearts burst with joy. Amen.

Music If comfortable stand and we will all sing God with us.

God With Us

Words and Music: Jim Bryson, Nathan Cochran, Barry Graul, Bart Millard, Mike Scheuchzer, Robby Shaffer arr by Ken Barker © 2007 Simpleville Music/Wet as a Fish Music

Who are we that you would be mindful of us?
 What do you see that's worth looking our way?
 We are free in ways that we never should be.
 Sweet release from the grip of these chains.

Like hinges straining from the weight, my heart no longer can keep from singing.
 All that is within me cries, for you alone be glorified. Emmanuel, God with us.
 My heart sings a brand new song, the debt is paid, these chains are gone.
 Emmanuel, God with us.

Lord, you know our hearts don't deserve your glory.
Still, you show a love we cannot afford.

Like hinges straining from the weight, my heart no longer can keep from singing.
All that is within me cries, for you alone be glorified. Emmanuel, God with us.
My heart sings a brand new song, the debt is paid, these chains are gone.
Emmanuel, God with us.

Such a tiny offering compared to Calvary. Nevertheless we lay it at your feet.
Such a tiny offering compared to Calvary. Nevertheless we lay it at your feet.
All that is within me cries, for you alone be glorified. Emmanuel, God with us.
My heart sings a brand new song, the debt is paid, these chains are gone.
Emmanuel, God with us.

Blessing Now may God the Father be with us as we prepare our hearts for Christ's birth. May the Spirit inspire us as we join our hearts in praise of Jesus, that the hope and peace of Christ might touch us all, and through us – everyone we meet. Amen.