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“Gabriel and Mary, Paul and You”
Text: Romans 16:26-27; Luke 1:26-38

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The verses we heard in the Epistle this morning are the very last words of Paul’s letter to the Romans. And frankly, they don’t seem to have much to do with either Advent or Christmas, which we will celebrate now in just a few days. But here’s the thing: if you take these verses and superimpose them or overlay them onto the Gospel we heard today - the story of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary and announcing that the time had come for the Saviour to be born - it almost sounds like Paul is talking about that very story. And so that’s what we’ll do today - put these two readings together - and maybe that will help us understand a little better not only the story of Mary, but that her story is our story too. So let’s go through Paul’s words and see what they can teach us.

He begins: *Now to him who is able to strengthen you . . .*

Do you think Mary needed strengthening? She was young, probably just a year or two a teenager, engaged, and now face-to-face with an angel who says to her: **Rejoice, O favored one, the Lord is with you!** She is **greatly troubled** at these words, we are told. She cannot figure them out, and why in the world they are spoken to her. She is just Mary, little Mary, insignificant Mary. Maybe it was *a little* like when you’re in school and the teacher needs someone to come up to the board and solve a problem, and before you can hide or look busy with something else she points at you and says: *You! You’re the one.* And your knees suddenly get weak, you get this giant knot in your stomach, and it feels like all the blood has rushed out of your head. Uh . . . *me?*

Yeah, Mary needed to be strengthened. *How often do you need to be strengthened?* When God has brought something into your life that you don’t think you’re ready for? Or when fears are getting the best of you and troubles seem overwhelming? When despair seems to be your daily bread and you don’t know how you’re going to face the day? When you wonder why you’re here and if you even matter at all - to God or the world? **Greatly troubled.** Perplexed. Terrified. Yeah, that’s us sometimes too, isn’t it?

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ . . .

The answer to being **greatly troubled** is the gospel - **the preaching of Jesus Christ.** Paul called it **my gospel**, the gospel that he preached; but it was Gabriel’s gospel too. And he preached it. This Word given to him by God to speak to Mary. The gospel that God had

graced her. He is giving to her a son. But not just any son, His Son. ***The Son of the Most High.***

Now, this brings to mind several thoughts: **first**, that there are times when perhaps God's grace and favor don't really feel like grace and favor at all! I'm sure Mary could have thought of about a thousand other things she'd rather have from God at that moment than a son! This wouldn't be easy and would certainly cause problems, not the least of which was with her future husband, Joseph! And maybe for you too - everything from God is good and for good, all grace and favor for you, His child. But it doesn't always seem so, does it? The thing seems bad, the timing seems bad. *Really God? This? Now?*

And then **second**, there's the question: ***How will this be?*** Mary was a virgin and everyone knows . . . well, you know. And maybe so for you: *How can this* (whatever it is for you) *be good? How can this work out? How will this be, God, for me?* . . . But the preaching of Jesus Christ tells us that you have found favor with God and He has graced you as well. Graced you with adoption as His child in Holy Baptism. Graced you with His Spirit in those same waters. Graced you with faith and His Word. To you these miracles have been given, and if these, then more too. ***For nothing is impossible with God.*** Not even virgin births. . . . Your *"impossible" more impossible than that?* What He has promised, He will do. **For you.**

Which is, in fact, what Paul says next: *Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, **according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations** . . .*

Or in other words, God's not making this up on the fly! He knows what He's doing, and what He has promised He will do. And so Gabriel tells Mary that these prophecies and promises of old are now happening: this Son being given to you - ***the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*** Yes Mary, your son, Jesus, is that promised Son of David. David's son according to the flesh, and David's Lord according to His divinity. And His kingdom will be a forever kingdom, and life in it forever, too. Eternal. A kingdom greater than this world and whatever it can throw at you.

And how often do we need to be reminded of that? When things in this world - and maybe in your life - seem to be going from bad to worse? Well this isn't the first time things looked that way. Think back to all the Scriptures - ***the prophetic writings***, Paul calls them - and what they tell us from of old, and how through it all God was faithful, kept His Word, and accomplished His promises. It took a long time, humanly speaking, from the promise in the Garden to its fulfillment in Mary, *but it happened*. And all God's promises will be fulfilled for you too. For the King on the throne of the Kingdom is your

Saviour, who came for you and died and rose for you and is now ruling all things for you. He will do it.

. . . according to the command of the eternal God . . .

The command of the eternal God whose word does what it says. According to the command of God Gabriel came and spoke to Mary. According to the Gospel God commanded him to speak, through which Mary would conceive. Just as in the beginning God commanded there be light and there was light. Just as Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb and He did. Just as Jesus speaks to bread and wine and it becomes his Body and Blood. Just as Jesus will call us from our graves on the Last Day, and we will be raised. The command of the eternal God is not like our commands - sometimes followed and sometimes not. God's Word does what it says. For Mary. For you.

And why? . . . *to bring about the obedience of faith* . . . Paul says. And that's what happens.

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." How could Mary do it? How could she agree? How could she go through with it all? Only by the strengthening of the Gospel and the power of God's Word working in her and providing what she needed. These words that Mary spoke are not so much a testimony to her as they are to the wonderful working of God in her.

And you as well. That you are here, that you believe, that you confess your sins, that you speak the creed, that you humbly receive the Body and Blood of Jesus - all testimony to the work of God and His Spirit in you. The Spirit that conceived faith in you and has worked in you the obedience of faith.

That we sometimes *disobey* is testimony to the sin still living in us. That we live not as the servant of the Lord but at my own service; that we want it to be according to my word. But even at such times - especially at such times - we see the grace and favor of the Lord, who does not cast us off and reject us, but calls us back to Him and His forgiveness. And especially into such a world was our Saviour born. A world of sin, a world of rebellion, a world of ME. But as Paul said earlier in the same Epistle (5:8): *God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners* - still in our rebellion; still self-centered - Christ came, Christ lived, and *Christ died for us*. Or in other words, not because we were good, but because we weren't.

That's what Christmas is all about. I think that's why it's a mistake to think Mary was holier or purer than anyone else and that's why she got to be the mother of God. No. Jesus came *from* sinners, *to* sinners, *for* sinners - Mary too - to bear our sin, *that in Him we might be the righteousness of God* (2 Cor 5:21). That we be forgiven. That just as Jesus,

the Son of God, came and lived as a son of man, so we sons and daughters of men might live as children of God, both now and forever.

And so Paul then concludes: . . . ***to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.***

For this is the wisdom of God: our Saviour, our salvation, this way, at this time.

And the angel departed from her. But the separation is only temporary. For they - Gabriel and Mary - will meet again, as will we, when we together bow before this child born of Mary, and worship Him in glory. And yet even before that, we gather together *with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven* around this altar to receive the Body and Blood of Mary's son, God's Son, the Son of David, our Saviour. As we gather here around what we cannot see but by faith, until we then see with our eyes. Just as what Mary saw with her eyes was an ordinary baby, but by faith she knew was so much more.

And so Gabriel departed from her, his message delivered, his job complete. But now with us is *Immanuel* - God Himself with us, conceived and growing in Mary. And as He has promised: *Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Matt 28:20), so He has come, never to depart. To be with you through thick and thin, until the end of the ages, when we will be with Him, forever.

That's the Gospel of Paul, of Gabriel, of Christmas. The Gospel that makes *every* Christmas - no matter where you are or how you are - a Merry Christmas.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.