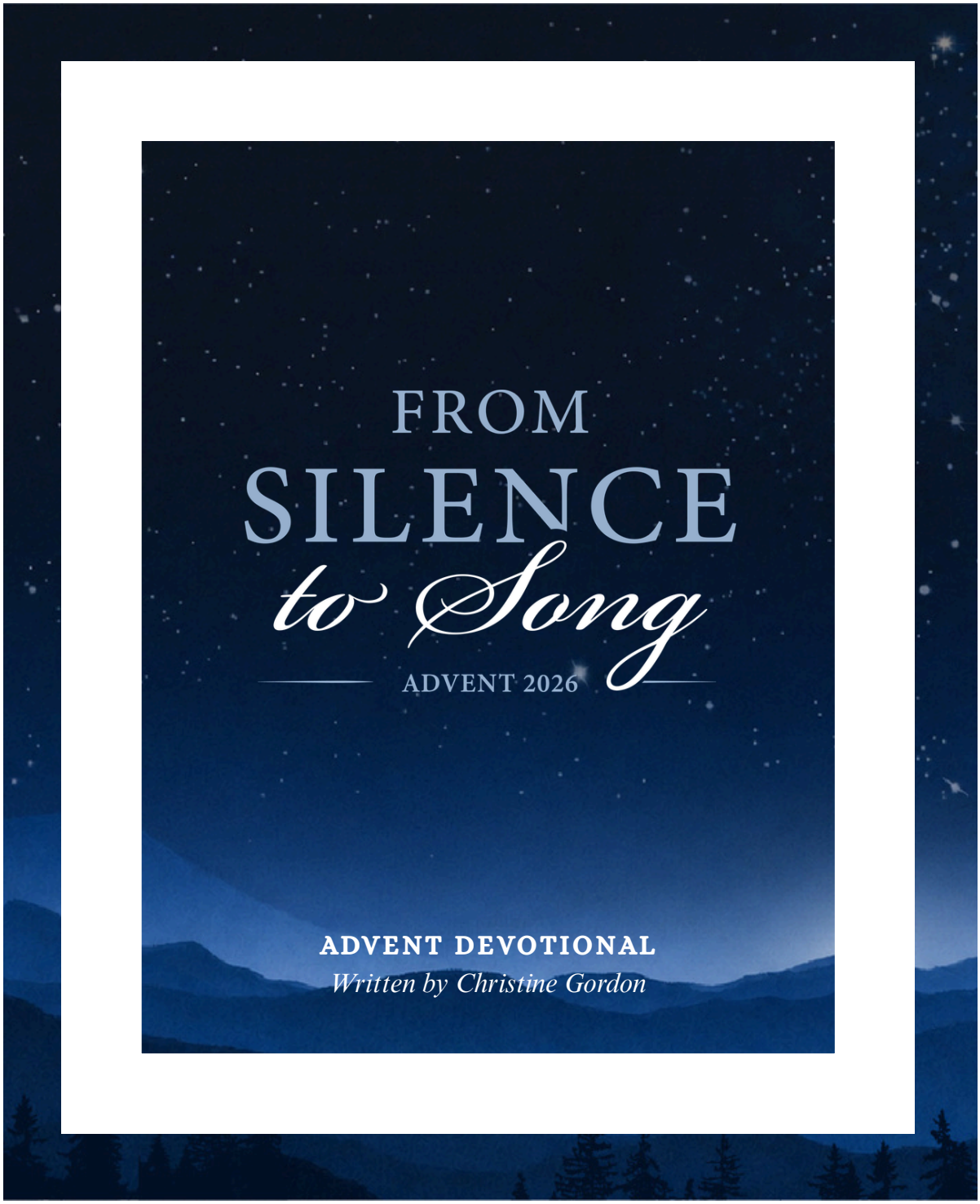


Chesterfield
Presbyterian Church

Luke 1:26-38

God makes a promise. Gabriel comes to Mary with the announcement that she will bear the Son of the Most High. Advent begins with God speaking into waiting and impossibility, initiating what only he can accomplish.

She wasn't the best-behaved girl in the village. Not the smartest or the most disciplined in her prayers. But isn't that where our minds go first? "Favored one," the angel called Mary. She must have earned that title somehow. Maybe she had the best attitude in her daily walk to draw water for the family. Or she was the quickest to be of help to the next- door mother who was sick and needed an extra pair of hands. Surely she did something to be picked, to deserve this "favor".

But this is the kingdom of grace and promises, governed by a King who doesn't trade in worthiness. This King bestows favor. He lays it on us like a blanket on a sleeping child. He makes us worthy. This was his first gift to Mary – the favor of a King.

But favor wasn't his only gift. Gabriel also came to announce a promise. Not the first, but one in a long line of promises given to his people beginning hundreds of years before with his promise to bless Abraham, the great Father of Israel. The culmination of those promises was just on the horizon. The Messiah an entire nation anticipated was about to be housed in a body like theirs. He would come in weakness and fragility, humble and needy. He would come to an oppressed nation, to a powerless teenage girl in an insignificant village, by the power of the Most High. Not by the will of a man, or because Nazareth was worthy. Holiness himself would overshadow the girl, the village, the world. The Bright Morning Star would enter the dark, quiet confines of Mary's small womb. The creator of every grain field would depend on Mary's body for food. The one in whom all things hold together would be held.

This is how God enters our lost, decaying world; he brings favor and a promise. He covers us with a blanket of undeserved preferential treatment and announces his intention to come nearer still.

This is how God comes to you this advent. He comes with his favor.

Over your greed and idolatry, your lust for power and apathy toward the things of God, he lays his blanket of favor. Over your bitterness and envy, your cruel words and attempts to control those you love, he unfolds his wide blanket of grace. As he said to Mary, he now says to you, "You have found favor with God." Will you believe him?

And then in a remarkable moment of generosity, God invites you to be a part of his growing kingdom. His promise to Mary is a promise to you as well. Mary's son will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and "of his kingdom there will be no end."

(Lk 1:33) Of his kingdom, the kingdom that offers favor when punishment is deserved, the administration that makes promises to weak and fickle men, women, and children, there will be no end.

His promise to welcome and involve those who respond to his kingdom proclamation still holds. How is this King calling you to respond?

Luke 1:39-45

God confirms the promise. Mary visits Elizabeth, and the promise she has received is affirmed through Elizabeth's Spirit-filled blessing and the joy of the child in her womb. God does not leave Mary alone with the promise; he gives her confirmation and community.

Four days. That's how long it would have taken Mary to walk the 75-100 miles between her home in Nazareth and that of her relative. Four days to think and ponder. To turn the words of the angel over and over in her mind. Was she pregnant by the time she left her home? Did she experience morning sickness? Fatigue? Did she wonder if she made it all up?

It's easy for us to imagine Mary as someone other than who she was – a young, unmarried, pregnant girl walking toward an unknown future. God called her to trust him without giving her the specifics. He sketched out the impossible and asked her to believe his words. Isn't that what he does with us?

But he didn't leave her to do it alone.

God gave Mary a confidant, a companion in her strange journey. Elizabeth had had her own bizarre encounter with God. After decades of asking for a baby and being disappointed, her husband returned from his temple service unable to speak, but communicating an astonishing message. Elizabeth's mind must have spun like Mary's. In time her body confirmed Zechariah's vision. Elizabeth, a woman long beyond child- bearing, was pregnant. She hid herself for months, rejoicing that she would no longer be looked down upon for never having children, a terrible burden for women during her place and time.

Notice God's order of operations. In his tender care for Mary, he first prepared her older relative, answering a decades-long prayer of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Mary's older relative was already six months pregnant. What a comfort this must have been to Mary as she traveled toward Judah. She wasn't alone in this journey of faith. Even the baby in Elizabeth's womb was in on this miraculous plan. He heard Mary's voice along with his mother, and he leaped for joy inside Elizabeth's womb. Immediately the Holy Spirit filled
Elizabeth offering Mary yet another confirmation of Gabriel's words.

"Blessed are you," Elizabeth exclaimed. "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Mary bowed before Gabriel by faith, not knowing the totality of what she said yes to. She walked the miles toward Judah by faith. And the Holy Spirit spoke through Elizabeth to commend Mary for believing Gabriel's words. "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (New Living Translation).

You, dear believer in God, are also blessed if you believe that God will do what he said.

What words of his will you believe this advent season?

Luke 1:46-55

God's people sing because of the promise. Mary responds to God's faithfulness with the Magnificat. The promise produces praise as she celebrates the God who remembers his mercy, overturns human expectations, and remains faithful to what he has spoken.

God is a multi-tasker. The best, actually. Consider Mary's song. She begins by praising God for what he's done for her personally. Faithful Jews of her day were still waiting for the Messiah who would rescue his people. Mary recognized that by choosing her, the Lord granted her an enormous honor. She would be remembered as blessed – "lucky" or "happy", the same word Jesus used to begin each beatitude years later.

God was blessing not only Mary, but all of Israel by placing Jesus in Mary's womb. The great redemption, the buying back from the slavery of sin that the prophets all predicted, was really happening. The Man of Sorrows who would heal his people by his wounds was about to have a face, fingerprints, and an address on earth. All of Israel would be helped and the promise to bless people through Abraham would be fulfilled (Lk 1:54- 55).

But God was up to more than that.

Stored up in the heart of God was a mystery that had not yet been revealed to Mary or Israel. He would not only bless his people, Israel, saving them from punishment. He would also extend his great mercy to those outside of Israel, the Gentiles. God called Abraham and made a special nation come from him to stand as a signpost to the world of God's greatness and generosity, his holiness and power. But his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 to bless all the families of the earth still stood. He would not only bless Israel, but all the other nations. If you are a believer not of Jewish descent, God was also fulfilling his promise to bless you when the power of the Most High overshadowed Mary.

But that's not all.

God was completing another glorious task in this amazing episode of his great story. Remember where Mary was when she sang this song of praise – the home of her elderly pregnant relative. Elizabeth and Zechariah, faithful worshippers of God, prayed for decades for a child. It was obvious at their age that God's answer to that prayer was "No". But during his surprising encounter with the angel in the temple, Zechariah heard this, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son…" God had heard the old man's consistent prayer over all
those years. And God would not only answer that prayer but would involve he and Elizabeth in the most magnificent answer to all of Israel's prayer for hundreds of years.

God's a multi-tasker.

Whatever you're asking of the Lord this advent season, consider that He is able to answer your prayer in conjunction with millions of others to accomplish his perfect will. Your job is not to figure out how he might do it, but only to offer your needs to God in faith.

Luke 1:67-80

The dawn is announced. After Zechariah's long silence, his voice returns in praise. He announces that God has visited and redeemed his people and that "the sunrise shall visit us from on high." The long darkness is beginning to break.

For those who feel like they've been waiting on God for a very long time, for any who are afraid he'll never do what he said he would, there is good news:

Jesus plays the long game.

When Zechariah's tongue was finally loosened, he couldn't stop praising God for keeping his promise to Abraham. That's Abraham who lived about 2,000 years before Zechariah. In Genesis 12, God promised Abraham he would be the father of a nation through whom the entire world would be blessed. God made a covenant, a contract with Abraham, to be his God and the God of his people.

That covenant was made more clear over hundreds of years as God spoke through Old Testament prophets of a coming savior. Through David and other kings were glimpses and foreshadows of a coming ruler. Over the two thousand years between Abraham and Zechariah, God slowly transformed the fuzzy impressionist painting of his promise to Abraham into a high-resolution photograph of Jesus, the promised one.

Two thousand years is a long time to keep a promise.

During his quiet service in the temple, the angel of the Lord told Zechariah the time of fulfillment had finally come. Zechariah's son, the answer to he and Elizabeth's many prayers for a child, would pave the way for the Lord to visit his people.

Most of us are discouraged when God seems slow to answer. We feel anxious about our children, our job performance, our money, and we want to see God act. Now. When he doesn't, we begin to fear He doesn't hear us, He's punishing us, or He doesn't think we're worthy of being heard.

Peter wrote these words, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:8-9).

What has God promised you? Not comfort or wealth, success or health, a peaceful family or fulfillment in your job. He promised you, as he did Abraham, that he would be with you always (Matt 28:20).

He promised to finish the good work of changing you to be more like him in holiness (Phil 1:6). He promised rest for your soul (Matthew 11:28-30), eternal life for his sheep which can't be snatched away (John 10:27-29), and a place prepared for you in the new earth (John 14:1-3). Jesus promised to satisfy your spiritual thirst (John 4:13-15), to produce fruit through you when you remain in him (John 15:5), and to end all the pain and sadness in the world (Rev 21:4).

Be encouraged as you wait on him to keep his promises. You may wait in the dark for a long time like Zechariah and Elizabeth. You may wait another 2,000 years for all the sadness in the world to end. But whatever promise you're waiting for him to keep, remember this: Jesus plays the long game.

Luke 2:1-7

The Savior comes. The promise becomes flesh. In the ordinary circumstances of Bethlehem, Jesus is born. What has been anticipated, spoken, and sung is now present among us.

As we read through the beginning of Luke 2, a question bubbles to the surface: Why include so many details? Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Syria, and Joseph. David and Bethlehem. In these first five verses Luke names four people and six places. He could have saved expensive ink by simply telling us Joseph had to go to his hometown to be registered.

But our God doesn't work in generalities with generic people. He doesn't tell stories outside of time and space. He works in specific ways with specific people. He tethers himself to his people as a whole and individually. He doesn't live in myths but in history. As we approach the high point of God revealing himself to the world, these stories come packaged not with "Once upon a time" but with "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus…"

Augustus (born Gaius Octavius) was Emperor of Rome from 27 BC to 14 AD. He was registering those in his empire for tax purposes. Joseph, a man living in Nazareth at the time, traveled with his betrothed, Mary, to Jerusalem. Joseph's great great great grandfather was David, so he went to the city of David to be registered. This trip of approximately 100 miles would have taken at least five days for the couple. We don't know exactly why Joseph brought Mary along for the journey, but we do know God had a purpose in bringing the couple to Jerusalem at that particular time. A prophecy from Micah more than 700 years before Jesus's birth predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." (Micah 5:2)

God wanted his son to be born in Bethlehem. And while Caesar Augustus ruled Rome, God ruled Caesar Augustus. So, God wove the desire of the Caesar, the timing of Mary's labor pains, the lineage of Joseph, the geography of Judah, and the capacity of the inn together so that his son would be laid exactly where God wanted him during the first moments of his incarnation. Jesus was born to the parents God chose in the city God chose to rest in the feeding trough God chose.

God is not a myth-teller, but a history maker. He entered a specific womb, town, and time. He kept a promise recorded by a singular prophet hundreds of years before. God works this way still, with you.

What does that look like for us today? God promised to be with Anne as she sits at her dining room table in a suburb of St. Louis in the year 2026. He promised to complete the sanctifying work he started in Justin so that he will look more like Jesus as he cares for his family of five and his colleagues at Deloitte. God promised rest for Anne Marie's soul as she brings her weary body and mind to him after long days of teaching.

If you are in Christ, he has made his precious promises to you, _____ (insert name here). And his ability to keep them, his power to weave time, geography, the actions of rulers and the minute details of your life is unlimited. This advent, will you hear his coming as a promise kept for you?

Luke 2:22-32

The promise is seen and received. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and declares that his eyes have seen God's salvation. The promise is no longer only awaited or announced; it is received, held, and recognized as light for the nations and glory for God's people.

As Jesus comes to the temple with his parents, let's walk around in some others' shoes to experience these moments in a fresh way.

Simeon: "...this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." (Lk 2:25) Simeon's daily life was shaped by a holy awe and a quiet longing for God's deliverance. Multiple hours of his day may have been spent in prayer, at the temple, or serving the poor. Simeon hadn't given up on the long wait for the Messiah. A message, a promise, a whisper of hope was given to this old man by the Holy Spirit. "Before you die, you will see the anointed of the Lord."

The Spirit prompted him to go to the temple that day. He must have stood near the gate or in the court of women, his ears filled with the bleats of lambs brought for sacrifice, his nostrils seared by the scent of burning flesh. Animal after animal, blood poured out, splattered on the altar by the priests. His eyes would have scanned the crowds of travelers seeking forgiveness, their hands full of grain and turtledoves, goats and pigeons.

As his eyes found a baby boy in the arms of a young girl, the Spirit prompted, "This is the one." Hundreds of years pointed to this one family, this one baby, this one moment. The old man stood in awe, overwhelmed and full of joy. Simeon reached for his savior, cradled him in his arms and worshipped. In that moment, his faith had become sight.

Mary: So much had happened so fast. The first few days after Jesus's birth were a blur of sleeping and waking, feeding and staring at this mysterious new life. All of a sudden a month had passed, and it was time to travel again, this time to the temple in Jerusalem. Because she and Joseph couldn't afford the lamb required by Old Testament law to purify Mary after giving birth, they brought birds, an allowance by Levitical law for the poor.

Suddenly an older man was walking toward her, a wide smile on his face. His joy was contagious as he spoke unbelievable words to her and asked to hold Jesus. And when the small weight of the baby was fully in his arms, he burst into praise, "With my own eyes I have seen what you have done to save your people…He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

Chesterfield Presbyterian Church: Two thousand years after this meeting, we stand like Simeon, looking for Jesus to come again. We watch like Mary, as others meet Jesus and declare him as the savior. We don't wait alone, but with millions of brothers and sisters around the world who long for his return. His second coming is as certain as his first. So bring your praise this advent, your ache for beauty and peace, your hunger for justice and goodness, bring them all to Jesus. He is the promised one, the righteous King, the coming savior.