

“MOVED BY THE MANGER - MARY”
A SERMON BASED ON LUKE 1:26-38
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2018
10 a.m.

Many Advent Bible readings for this time of year

come from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

They are readings that reflect that hunger we can have

for God to come to us.

Readings that are echoed in a hymn lyrics such as

‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel,

ransom captive Israel.

that mourns in lonely exile here.

Until the Son of God appear.”

It is a call to God

to buy us back.

to set us free.

to make it right.

“Tear open the heavens God, and come down.

Visit us Lord God. Come down.”

Who among us cannot connect with that cry?

Come down God.

Visit me.

Bring me back.

Set me free.

Make it right.

Tear open the heavens and come down God.

I need a healing

I want an answer to my question.

I want a resolution to my problem.

Come down God.

I want direction for my future.

I want you to work.

Tear open the heavens and come down God,

I want the pain to stop.

Like the arrival of those you love at Christmas,

I get excited to hear Isaiah declare the anticipated visit,

but in this case, of God.

There is a voice calling in the wilderness.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

He is coming.

He will visit.

Get everything ready.

Lift up the valleys.

Flatten the mountains.

Make the crooked paths straight, the rough places smooth.

God is coming.

Be comforted my people, says God.

I am coming.

In today's passage in Luke,

the curtains have started pulling back on the heavens

the light from backstage has begun to cast its beam

through the gap.

The heavens have begun tearing open.

God sent the angel Gabriel onstage to Nazareth,

to talk to Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph.

As the heavens started to tear open,

one of the first beams of light to get through,

the revelation of the glory of God

shone down on Mary.

The angel met her saying,

‘Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you.’

God’s words from Isaiah 65 prove true.

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.

I was found by those who did not seek me.”

I often wonder what Mary was doing that day,

when the heavens tore open and the light came down on her.

Was she preparing food for her family before supper?

Washing up before bed?

Was she on her way home from the market?

Was she dozing in the cool evening air?

Was she cleaning her home?

Maybe just out for a walk with her friends?

We aren't told.

But God took the initiative as God always does.

God revealed himself to Mary on an "every" "ordinary" day.

He sent her a messenger.

He sent the angel Gabriel.

Mary was greatly troubled, perplexed, shaken
by the greeting.

She wondered what kind of greeting it might be.

"Greetings, you who are highly favoured,
the Lord is with you."

When I get a letter in the mail with a return address

of the Canada Revenue Agency,

I am perplexed by the mail.

I wonder what kind of greeting it might be.

When the doctor phones my house unexpectedly

I am shaken by the call.

I wonder what kind of greeting this might be.

I wonder what kind of news am I getting.

Mary wondered what kind of greeting it might be.

She was troubled. She was shaken.

Gabriel said to her

“Greetings, the Lord is with you.”

I think this was the same angel who found Old Testament

underwhelming Gideon hiding in the winepress, and said to him

“The Lord is with you Mighty Warrior.”

Gabriel said to young, underwhelming Mary from, out of the way, Nazareth.

The Lord is with you Mary. You are highly favoured.

The words of the prophet Haggai

tell us what can happen when God shows up.

God says, I will shake the heavens.

I will shake the earth, and the sea and the dry land.

I will shake all nations.

The desire of all nations shall come.

The heavens will be torn open.

God will come down.

The world will shake.

Mary shook first.

Gabriel saw her shaking and said,

“Don’t be frightened Mary.

You have found favour with God.

You will be with child.

You will give birth to a son.

Give him the name Jesus.

He will be great.

He will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

His kingdom will never end.”

Mary had trouble getting her head around this news.

“How Gabriel?

I am a virgin.

Never mind that I'm a peasant girl without a royal bone in my body.
It's simply impossible for me to be pregnant."

Gabriel continued.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,

and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

In this way, the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

I can give you a sign.

Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age.

Mary, nothing is impossible with God."

Isaiah called out,

"Tear open the heavens and come down God.

And as the heavens opened,

one of the first beams of heavenly light

shone on Mary.

How fortunate for her.

She had found favour with God.

God sent Gabriel to her.

God visited her.

God shook her.”

However, not surprisingly, how God defines favour,
is not how we define favour.

Mary you are highly favoured.

You will be pregnant.

You will bear the shame of being pregnant out of wedlock.

You will run the risk of the death penalty
for breaking your engagement.

You will carry the burden of risk
in telling Joseph,
of trying to explain to your family and friends
that you really had a visit from an angel,
that you have not been with a man,

It will be on you to convince those closest to you
that it is God who has been at work in your life.

You are highly favoured Mary.

You will get to travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth,
nine months pregnant,

with swollen feet, and sore back,
only to deliver this king, this Son of God,
in a stable, with only a feeding trough to lay him in.

You are highly favoured Mary.

You and Joseph will be refugees in Egypt,
fleeing the wrath of Herod.

You are highly favoured Mary,
you will watch your Son,
rise to fame,
healing the sick, bringing the Word of God to life,
only to watch him executed in a criminal's death.

The power of the Most High will overshadow you Mary.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

You are highly favoured Mary.

God moved.

The earth moved.

Mary's world shifted.

No wonder she shook.

I think we sometimes make the mistake

of assuming that when God does move,

that when the heavens tear open

and God is revealed,

that when he begins to work in us and through us

that it will be in a way we anticipate,

or in a way we expect,

or in a way that makes us comfortable,

or at least more comfortable.

God said in Isaiah,

I will lay waste the mountains and the hills

and dry up their vegetation.

I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools.

God was saying,

I will wipe out the old way,

and make it all new.

I will reshape, refashion, renew.

I will work in a way you aren't expecting.

You are highly favoured Mary.

I will work in you, with you, through you.

It will shake up your life.

I will lead you on unfamiliar paths.

I will take you places you have not known, and haven't wanted to go.

I will lead you.

I will guide you through the new landscape I have created.

When we call on God to come down,

and ask him to step into our lives,

we sometimes make the mistake,

of assuming he will do so on our terms,

when we want,

in the way we want,

to do what we want.

When God does move, does visit us,

we aren't prepared to be shaken.

Yet that's exactly what we are told to expect.

When God moves,

expect to be shaken, shaken to the core.

When we hear Gabriel's words to Mary

Greetings you who are highly favoured.

Usually feelings of envy are stirred.

Wow, Mary is the special one.

Mary is getting the attention of God.

Mary is being noticed.

We listen to the announcement like she's won the lottery.

Congratulations Mary,

of a possible three hundred thousand maidens in the land,

God has chosen you.

You are the winner.

Tell her what she's won.

How different the movement of God is,

how disturbing,

how earth shattering,

and fundamentally shaken it leaves us.

How careful we must be calling God to come down.

Mary asked the question.

How is this going to work God? How can this be?

We live with the mistaken assumption,

that when God moves in our lives,

it will indeed be like releasing the genie from the lamp

for our three wishes.

We call for God to come down,

thinking that his presence will mean,

I will get a full healing from my illness.

My money problems will disappear and I will get the job.

Thinking his presence will mean,

I will no longer worry.

Thinking his presence will mean

that my relationships will easily resolve.

that the pain will stop.

Thinking his presence will mean we are at peace,

that life will make sense,

and that our purpose will be clear.

I think this is what we are looking for when we call for God to come down

However, anticipating the visit, on our terms,

we sometimes forget the implications, of God's terms.

Invited, and even sometimes uninvited, God will step into your life.

It may not be the angel Gabriel at your door.

But God will move in you.

I believe there is a time in everyone's life,

when they are raw and exposed to God,

when the curtain has been pulled back

and the light shines.

A time when God says,

I'm going to take you on a path you have not travelled.

Follow me.

These are two of Jesus most powerful words.

Follow me.

Hand on my shoulder, let's go.

God's movement in your life will shake you up.

You can expect to be challenged to obey God and serve God
in ways you never thought possible.

You can expect that God will place opportunities in your path,
opportunities to serve that will leave you asking, how?

You can expect some of the most difficult experiences you will face,
and the most powerful claim on your life you've known.

God's word becoming God's words will shake you.

Forgive in the way I've forgiven you.

Love in the way I've loved you.

Give in the way I've given to you.

Leave what you cling to, and follow me.

Unfortunately, many of us come to realize we don't really want God
to come down if its going to be on his terms.

Tear open the heavens and come down God.

It is a prayer that could change your life.

But as the cliché says,

be careful what you pray for.

Yet, the angel said to the shaken Mary.

Nothing is impossible with God

The Lord is with you mighty warrior.

Greetings you who are highly favoured.

The Lord is with you.

Nothing is impossible with God.

God said, I will shake the earth, the sea, the dry land.

I will shake all the nations.

I will shake the barricades.

You will see the heavens opened.

You will be highly favoured.

You will see God.

Jesus said,

Follow me.

I have come that they might have life

and have it to the full.

The paths are unfamiliar, they are not known to you.

So put your hand on my shoulder and step with me.

Today we celebrate a message from God, and God's arrival on the scene.

Don't forget that his visit will mean things you weren't expecting.

When the heavens open

and God declares that he wants to come into your life,

that he wants to grow in you,

be prepared to be shaken to your very core.

To be taken on an unfamiliar path.

It will require trust.

There will be a cost.

You won't be able to continue life the way you've always lived it,

and follow Jesus.

However, to quote Samuel Miller; he says,

"Stop riding the brakes of the heart.

The soul will never grow, tied down in bed.

The higher we build the barricades of caution

to protect ourselves,

the deeper grows the grave we call our lives."

Jesus said I have come that you might have life.

Life to the full.

Learn to say what Mary said.

May the courage of Mary's response be yours.

'I am the Lord's servant.

May it be to me as you have said.'

Let Christ grow in you.

It will shake you.

But as you bring Christ into the world

you will also get to see Christ.

shake and change the world through you

For nothing is impossible with God.

Amen.