

“Believing and Receiving”

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New Testament Lesson: Luke 1:39-45

Old Testament Lesson: Micah 5:2-5

In her article titled “Is the Grinch stealing your Christmas?” Elizabeth Greene says that “many Grinches threaten to steal our joy and peace at Christmastime. We think we are buying just the right gift for someone, but it receives a cool reception. The rush of the season, long lines and slow traffic replace our joy with frustration. Some relatives try our patience. After the season passes, unmet expectations dampen our spirit, and the holiday blues move in.

With the arrival of the new year, we are relieved the Christmas stress has passed,” says Greene, “instead of being refreshed by the promise of Christ.” How do we arrive at the other side of Christmas refreshed by the promise of Christ, instead of merely relieved that all the holiday hubbub is finally over?

The answer to how we keep the true spirit of Christmas alive has to do with how we receive and hold the promises of Christ, those hopes and dreams that we cling to in faith despite what we are being hit with on any given day.

Some of us hope for financial security, others for health and wholeness, still others hope for peace in their families, in neighborhoods hit by senseless violence, in a world of global unrest. Many young people today are just hoping for the chance of a bright future amid increasingly complex challenges and uncertainties.

Whatever it is you are hoping for in your heart of hearts, it is certain that the promises of Christmas are more powerful than any challenge or uncertainty ***you’re facing.***

I mean look at challenges and uncertainties that Mary faced leading up to the first Christmas ever. She didn’t even have the person of Jesus to look to, only the promise of his coming. On the basis of that promise and that promise alone, Luke tells us, “Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”

Why did Mary pick this time to visit Elizabeth? An angel of the Lord tells her she will conceive in her womb through the power of the Holy Spirit and bear a son named Jesus who will be called the Son of the Most High and establish a new kingdom, and rule throughout the world, and embody God’s will and God’s purpose, and Mary beats a path out of town.

I don’t blame her! “Here I am, Lord,” she says. “Let it be to me according to your word,” she says, and what does the angel do? The angel departs from her, leaves her all alone.

Mary is a young girl in a male dominated world. She has no rights, no voice in society, nothing of her own that was not given to her by a man – first her father and now her fiancé Joseph. Without them, she is nothing, as things stand in the world. And that's when God says to her you are inexplicably pregnant – mysteriously, strangely, bizarrely, unaccountably pregnant! Talk about challenges and uncertainties!

Mary feels like her only hope in getting her feet back on solid ground is Elizabeth, her cousin, who the angel also visit, who was also told of a remarkable pregnancy, pregnant with John the Baptizer, conceived by Elizabeth and her husband when they were well past the age when this was even possible, as things stand in the world.

But for Mary and for Elizabeth, what's important is not how things look in the world around them, but rather what God promises in the future ahead of them. With God, nothing is impossible.

We need to be reminded of that! Mary and Elizabeth needed to be reminded of that – that with God nothing is impossible. It's right here in Luke 1, verse 37 when the angel visited Mary and told her about Elizabeth. And John, and Jesus, of course. With God, nothing is impossible.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child who will be called John leaps in her womb and she exclaims to Mary 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

As Mary went about trying to keep hope alive at the most challenging and uncertain time of her life, look what God did. God sends her to Elizabeth where she hears just the right words at just the right time to provide her with the comfort, assurance, peace, joy, and nonjudgmental love that she so desperately needs.

When was the last time you had your heart skip a beat because of the glorious, inexplicable promise and blessing of God out ahead of you? That is what it means to keep the spirit of Christmas alive – believing and receiving God's blessing, even at our most challenging and uncertain time in life – especially then – when all hope seems lost.

To have that – to have God enter into your heart of hearts and bless you beyond your wildest imagination, you and I – we – we need to believe in God's promises and be open to receiving God's blessing.

That's the true purposes of Christmas – to have us believe so that we are **able to receive**. All the rest of it – the food and the presents and the decorations – the true purpose of all of it is to point to God's presence in our lives.

If we're able to keep that spirit alive this Christmas and beyond, then we can live with the certainty that God will lead us to just the right place at just the right time to receive just the right blessing that we otherwise can't imagine ever getting or achieving.

Let's say you're struggling financially. It's not like the answer is easy – it's not; it's hard. When disease and illness strike, we are powerless for the most part, and so we place our lives in the hands of another – a doctor. When our family life is in turmoil, there are no quick fixes. Amid the violence of our neighborhoods and the warring of nations, true and lasting peace is elusive.

The only hope of getting through it – the only hope of rising above all of these challenges and uncertainties – is the hope of Christ's coming, the hope of Christmas. And friends, Christ is always coming. Jesus is always here for us, to point us in the right direction, to give us hope in times most hopeless, to send his Spirit of peace to quiet the turmoil of this life. Our challenge is knowing who to turn to when we need reminded of this, when we need the assurance of things hoped for, the certainty of things not seen.

A fourth-grade teacher in Nome, Alaska, had just received the latest curriculum resource and was discussing with the class the suggestions for a Christmas pageant. The instruction manual read: "For the children playing Santa's reindeer, there should be brown outfits, and passable reindeer horns can be made of bare branches, trimmed to the proper shapes and painted."

The problem was it's completely barren in Nome, Alaska, in December. The teacher looked out at the treeless, snow-covered landscape and said, "Well, children, I guess we'll have to do something else. We can't make horns of branches because there isn't a tree for miles." The children looked disappointed. Then one little boy spoke up. "We haven't any trees, teacher," he said, but we do have lots of reindeer horns."

Just when things look most hopeless, God provides, even and often through the voice of the youngest and most inexperienced person in the room, the person who keeps hope alive.

Because Mary was such a young person, she sought the wisdom and guidance of older and wiser Elizabeth and what does Elizabeth tell her? She says, "Blessed (are you) who believed", "that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to (you) by the Lord."

Mary didn't have the years of wisdom that Elizabeth had, but Mary had something even more powerful. Mary had faith, and that gave her hope. Because she believed, she received – believed God's promises and received God's blessings.

Do you; do we? Do we believe in the promises of the Lord? Do we enjoy the blessings this brings? Whatever it is that eludes you – comfort, assurance, peace, joy, love – whatever you long for, it is available to you through our Lord Jesus Christ. And the one who can point you to it – whatever it is you seek in the Lord – the one who can guide you is the one sitting next you, somewhere.

Somewhere in this sanctuary, somewhere in your household, somewhere in your school or workplace, somewhere in your neighborhood or community there is someone who can guide you, and comfort you, and provide for you, **and bless you.**

All we have to do is to keep the faith and be open to the promise, the promise of Christ born into this world, today, and every moment hereafter – the promise of Christmas, hidden amid everyday events, a promise that is available to us all every moment that we turn to Christ in faith, and then step out in hope. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy and loving God, for the extravagant gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, we thank you.

For the obedience of a young mother who embraced an unexpected plan for her life, we praise you.

For the loyalty of an earthly father whose love was tested, we exalt you.

For the surprising grace in our lives that sings out as angelic as a heavenly choir, we magnify you.

For guiding light that appears as miraculously as a star to shepherds, we worship you.

Welcome, Emmanuel. Come to us with hope, joy, peace and love that we may kneel before you with gifts of adoration, obedience and faith.

We pray all this in the name of the one who came you're your love might shine in and through out lives, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.
Amen.**