

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

What do you still need to do to be ready for Christmas? I don't mean to stress you out, but it's only a few days away. So I hope you've thought about that a bit.

Maybe you need to clean the house or make some lists and make sure that you'll have everything for Christmas dinner. How about gifts – buying them, of course, and wrapping them? If they're for people who live at a distance, you'll now need express delivery if you want to be sure they arrive before the 25th. And, of course, there are decorations to take care of, and a lot of other things.

But since this is a sermon, you may have realized that I'm not really asking about all of those things. What are you doing – what do you need to do – to be ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus? Or to put it another way, what do you need to do in order to receive God's Christmas gift to you in the right way?

What we need to think about is the meaning of Jesus' birth for us today. Otherwise, we're just observing a historical event like we do when we make note of some famous person's birthday.

And since we want to be ready for the birth of the Savior, we can learn something from the young woman in today's gospel reading. She was the first person who got the news that the Messiah was going to be born.

We call this event “The Annunciation,” as if it were the most important announcement ever. And in a way, it was. What's more, at least at the beginning of the story, Mary seems to be kind of stressed out by it. The way artists have portrayed the Annunciation can give the impression that Mary was being very religious when Gabriel appeared to her.

The paintings often show her kneeling at a prayer desk, like a medieval princess with her devotional book. But Mary wasn't a princess. She was a young, teenage peasant girl living in a remote little town in Galilee. And while she undoubtedly prayed, it's maybe more likely that at the time, she was doing some kind of routine household work, like sweeping the floor or washing dishes.

That seems to be typical of the way God deals with us. Think of some of the other biblical stories in which God, or God's messengers, come to people. Moses was tending his sheep when God spoke to him out of the burning bush, and Gideon was threshing wheat when an angel appeared to him and called him to lead a liberation movement.

So maybe the first lesson about getting ready is to expect to be surprised. There's a sense in which we can't get ready for God because the initiative is always God's! And God, who is always at work in the world in hidden ways, can make himself known in the middle of our everyday lives.

And the surprise continues when God's messenger speaks: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” We're told that Mary was “perplexed” by this. We can imagine her thinking, “Favored? Why should I be favored by God?”

People have continued to wonder and speculate about that through the years, but our text doesn't give us an answer. The Bible doesn't tell us why Mary was favored by God, but it does tell us for what she was favored. She was to be the mother of the Messiah – the one who would give birth to God, Christians would later say.

And again, this is the way God often works. The Bible doesn't tell us why God chose Abram to be the father of God's people. The prophet Samuel was surprised when God told him to anoint the boy David as king of Israel instead of one of his older brothers.

And now, quite unexpectedly, Mary has been chosen to bear the one greater than his ancestor David, the one of whose “kingdom there will be no end.”

But an obvious question arises here, and Mary is quick to voice it: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (“since I do not know a man” is a literal translation). People back then didn’t know nearly as much about biology as we do today, but they certainly knew from where it was that babies came.

Even in the Old Testament’s stories of amazing births, like that of Isaac to Sarah when she was 90 years old, male and female parents were required. Mary is not gullible, and is willing to question even an angel. This gets us to the heart of being ready for Christmas – really, of being ready to receive God’s blessing at any time during the year.

And I hasten to add that what’s crucial is not exactly how we understand this claim that Jesus was conceived of a virgin or whether or not we “believe in the virgin birth” as people often put it. What’s crucial is trusting that God will do what God has promised to do.

Which is not to say that the idea of Jesus’ virginal conception is unimportant. The point of it, though, is not that sex is bad, or that God had to do it that way in order to assume our human nature, or that it’s just an arbitrary display of divine power.

God is the ultimate Creator of each one of us – we wouldn’t exist without God. But for Jesus to come into the world in this startling way means that the Creator is at work in a new way. Mary will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, who in the words of the Nicene Creed is “the Lord, the giver of life” – all life.

So if we believe that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived, this unique activity of God is that to which this fact points.

And if we believe that Mary’s virginity is a symbol – but not “just” a symbol! – then that is what the symbol means. (There is no point in saying that something is symbolic if we have no idea to what the symbol refers.)

The point is that the child to be born of Mary has a unique relationship with God. But Mary’s question “How can this be?” is not primarily a question about biology, and she isn’t given a biological answer. Instead, she’s given an answer about trust.

It is the Spirit of God and “the power of the Most High” that will make this happen, and Gabriel points to the pregnancy of the supposedly barren Elizabeth as an example of this power. “For,” he adds, “nothing will be impossible with God.”

All right, God can do anything. That seems like a reasonable proposition – if we believe in God and if we make the qualification that God can’t do things that are self-contradictory, like making something happen and not happen at the same time. (Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed that out.)

But the issue here isn’t about the truth of propositions. It’s not whether God could do what was promised but whether God will do what was promised. In other words, does Mary trust God to do what God has said?

And there we come to the heart of the story, and to the most important way to be ready for God’s coming, at Christmas or any other time. We are to believe God’s promises and put our trust in the one who was born of Mary and who comes to us in Word and sacraments.

“Let it be with me according to your word,” Mary said to God’s messenger. And with that, she is our preeminent example of how to be ready for the coming of Christ.

Mary's complete trust in God means that she did not rely on her own wisdom or abilities but only on that divine favor that the angel had announced to her. As Martin Luther wrote in his commentary on the Magnificat, Mary's song of thanksgiving that comes a few verses after our text:

“[Mary] does not glory in her worthiness nor yet in her unworthiness, but solely in the divine regard, which is so exceedingly good and gracious that he deigned to look upon such a lowly maiden, and to look upon her in so glorious and honorable a fashion.

They, therefore, do her an injustice who hold that she glories, not indeed in her virginity but in her humility. She gloried neither in the one nor in the other, but only in the gracious regard of God.”

On Christmas we receive God's greatest gift, Jesus our Lord. Let's follow Mary's example and receive him with trust and thanksgiving. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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The Martin Luther quote on “The Magnificat” at the end of this sermon is from Luther's Works, Vol. 21 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), page 314.