

4TH Sunday in Advent

December 24, 2017

Romans 16:25-27:

***“Moving Beyond the Moment . . .
Glory Forevermore”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The verses we heard in our Epistle lesson for this morning are the very last words of Paul's letter to the Romans. At first glance, they don't seem to have much to do with either Advent or Christmas until you focus on the words: "the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed." In those words, you can "plug in" the whole life and teachings of Jesus Christ our Savior. You can start with his conception and cover everything until the moment he ascends into heaven. Today, we find ourselves celebrating specifically his conception and birth. And, I might add, one of the hallmarks of our celebration of Christmas is singing.

When you read the Biblical record of the Christmas account, it is full of singing. Mary sings, Zechariah sings, the angels sing, Simeon blesses God. Soon we will be singing many hymns that are near and dear to us. And many of these hymns will use the word "glory." That word takes us to the idea of "revelation," or "revelatory light." Light shines and reveals to us what is there, what is to be known, and removes what is mysterious or that which is shrouded in darkness. Again, many of our Christmas hymns that we will sing will use that word "glory." ("Angels from the Realms of Glory," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Joy to the World," "O Come All Ye Faithful," and others). The apostle Paul writes in our epistle lesson, "to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ." Jesus shines to push back the mystery of who God is and what his will is for us!

You may or may not know it, but the words of our epistle lesson (Romans 16:25-27) read like a doxology or a verse of praise in the original language, and are thought by most all to be from the liturgy of the ancient church. Our text becomes like a hymn that was possibly sung when the service of the Word concluded, right before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Our text is a hymn of praise that points us to what God has done for us in Jesus his Son. Mystery has been revealed, and we cannot help but to sing with great joy about what we now know! Jesus is the mystery which was "kept secret" until that "O Holy Night" in Bethlehem. In Paul's day, and throughout the last two thousand years, even up to this very day, God's command is being fulfilled and people are being saved through Christ and through the Scriptures that testify to him. With all of that in mind, as we find ourselves gathered together this morning on the Fourth and last Sunday in Advent, we are preparing to sing with the angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom his favor rests."

We are still Moving Beyond the Moment. And as we consider the glory of the first Christmas, we look forward to **Glory Forevermore!** The secret kept for long ages has been revealed, and there is much more to be revealed when we leave this world behind to behold the glory of his face. As we celebrate Christ's first coming and the glory that was revealed "Away in a Manger" in a town called Bethlehem, we further anticipate his return that we might live in his glory without end, receiving that which is inexpressible in heaven. For long ages, it was a secret. God's people waited. Now our much shorter wait is nearly over. God has revealed the mystery of the Gospel in the incarnation of his Son, and very soon, we will see all that can be seen - **Glory Forevermore** - in him! With that in mind, let's put our epistle lesson together with our Gospel lesson, and move from the moment down here to the glory that is now and forever in Jesus our Lord!

Our Gospel lesson for this morning recounts the time when an angel came to Mary in order to announce the virgin birth of Jesus. “And he [Gabriel] came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.” Paul begins our epistle lesson by saying: “now to him who is able to strengthen you . . .” So, what do you think? Do you think that Mary needed strengthening? She was basically a poor nobody, from all that we can glean from the Bible. She was most likely a young teenager, who lived in a place where most people would avoid living, engaged to be married, and now troubled with words from an angel.

Isn't that often the way it is with us? Do we not often find ourselves living in what feels like a meaningless life, perhaps feeling that we hardly matter to anyone, surrounded by a rough world with a not so good future, and even troubled with what God often allows in our lives and further says to us in his holy Word? She doesn't know it yet, but the promise that is coming her way will have a happy ending, but the road that will lead to the happy ending will be filled with pot holes. Mary needed to be strengthened, just like we need to be strengthened when we feel lost in a sea of humanity, when God brings things into our lives that we are not so sure we are ready for, or when fears and troubles seem to be overwhelming and the future filled with fright. Mary was afraid.

Luke records, “And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And 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.’” In our epistle lesson, Paul writes: “now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ . . . “

Whenever we are greatly troubled by whatever, we often find ourselves making a list of solutions and then trying them out as we go along don't we? It seems that only when we think we have run out of options do we remember the Lord. The truth is that the first thing we should think about is the solution that is above all other solutions - the gospel, or “the preaching of Jesus Christ,” as Paul puts it. The thing we need is the favor of God. And that is exactly what Mary is given and will treasure in her heart through all that she must go through in life. This gospel in which Gabriel speaks is God's grace in her life. A son will be conceived and born, and not just any son. He will rule all things for the good of his kingdom. His kingdom will last forever, which means that Mary will live forever in the rule of his love - and we will too!

Now, what is interesting about all of this is the truth that God's favor toward us doesn't always feel like favor at all. You cannot help but to wonder if Mary might have had a wish list herself, or a list of possible solutions for her to try out in order to make her life a little better. But, the details of the good news were going to cause trouble - trouble for Joseph, and a sword that would pierce her soul. In the same way, we need to understand that the favor of God in this life leads to bearing a cross. Still, at the end of it all is resurrection and everything good. The good news, which can often cause a lot of trouble down here is so great and wonderful that it becomes . . . well, Paul writes: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.” For the joy set before us we endure, just as Christ endured the cross knowing that it would bring us together forever!

Luke writes: “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.’” We are a lot like Mary. When we feel so much trouble, and then we find ourselves in God’s favor, it all seems like it cannot possibly happen or end up that way. It seems like everything is against it. But the Word of God is powerful word that will make it all come about. Luther remarks that it was at this moment that Mary conceived through her ear. She heard the word of God, and when God speaks, it comes to be. Paul writes: “according to the command of the eternal God . . .”

We need to be reminded of this all the time. When the things of this life seem to be going from bad worse, we are to know that God has made many great and glorious promises to us. What he commands will come to be. When God makes promises to us, we can be rest assured that he will keep them. As God command light to be, so light became. As God speaks a word of conception in Mary’s ear and she conceives, so also God is able to do all things that he promises to us. Consider the Bible and all that God said about the coming of the Savior. Did he not fulfill it? If he has fulfilled our salvation, then will he not also do everything else? He will do it! He will - even that which seems impossible or overwhelmed by our own sin and death.

Now, what then is there left to do as we move from the moment to the forever glory? Mary charts the course and Paul makes it clear. Mary said, “For nothing will be impossible with God. Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And Paul writes about “the obedience of faith - to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!” As you can see, there is nothing left up for us to do, because it all has been done by God - it rests in the hands of the one who loves us with an everlasting love! Indeed! To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! **Glory Forevermore!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott