

One of our members recently posted a note on Facebook saying that Santa was going to have to come in the front door this year because repairs were being made to their chimney. Another one of our members shared how their child once said they had proof that Santa existed. When they asked about that proof, the child said they knew Santa had to exist *“because you’re too cheap to buy me all these presents.”* In reflecting on their own childhood, that parent then wondered why it was that Santa only watched when they were bad. After all, they said, *“I never remember being told that Santa was watching when I did good things. Only when I did bad things.”*

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. At the end of the day, children all over the world will go to bed with the joyful EXPECTATION of what they will discover under the tree the following morning. They will not do so merely because someone told them Santa will be bringing toys on Christmas Day. Nor will they do so merely because they have heard a song that says *“you better watch out. . . you better not cry”* for *“he knows if you’ve been bad or good.”*

They will do so because of what happened last Christmas. And the Christmas before that. And the Christmas before that. For on Christmas Day in each of those years, they were told that it was Santa (and not a suddenly generous parent) that was responsible for their windfall of presents. As a result, they will go to bed tomorrow night with a SONG of EXPECTATION on their lips, singing *“You better watch out! You better not cry. Better not pout. I’m telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.”*

In house after house around the world that will happen only because one night long ago a girl named Mary also went to bed with a SONG of EXPECTATION on her lips. That song hadn’t been sung to her by her parents. Nor had it been broadcast to her in a commercial. Instead, it had burst up from within her own soul through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The setting for that song is given to us by Luke in the first chapter of his gospel. There he says that God sent an angel to Mary, and she was *“greatly troubled at his words.”* Luke then goes on to say that Mary became even more troubled when the angel said *“you will be with child and give birth to a son.”* For as Mary explained to the angel, she was not yet married, and having a baby while not married would have been a violation of the Law, and that could have meant being punished.

Looking for someone to help her address her fear and confusion, Luke tells us Mary fled her home town of Nazareth, and set out on a dangerous three day journey to the home of her cousin Elizabeth. When she arrived, Elizabeth confirmed the prophetic words of the angel Gabriel, saying *“blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”* Having been encouraged that the things the angel said were about to happen were not going to result in a negative reality for her, but a positive one (for her and the world!), Mary burst out in song: *“my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”*

Over the last three weeks, we have therefore been looking at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion. The first week, we saw how God addressed her fear and confusion by enabling her to feel comforted. We saw this in the words of Mary in her song: *“for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”* For the angel had prophesied that her son would not bring her shame and

ridicule, but would be “*great . . . and . . . called the Son of the Most High. [And] the Lord God [would] give him the throne of his father David.*”

The next week, we saw how God addressed her fear and confusion by enabling her to feel encouraged. We saw this in the words of Mary in her song: “*the Mighty One has done great things for me.*” For the angel had prophesied that not only would her SON be “*great . . . and . . . called the Son of the Most High, [and be given] the throne of his father David*” but she herself would be “*blessed . . . among women!*” with HER name being on everyone’s lips as well as the name of her son.

The third week, we saw how God addressed her fear and confusion by enabling her to experience deliverance. We saw this in the words of Mary in her song: “*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*” For the angel had prophesied that the child to be born to her would not be an ordinary child, but would “*be . . . the Son of God,*” which meant that the God who knows our “*inmost thoughts*” would enable her to be “*filled . . . with good things*” spiritually even when she might be hungry physically, while those who were rich - despite all they had - would remain spiritually “*empty.*”

As we gather together to worship God on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we look at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion by turning to one more phrase in Mary’s song. For in that song, Mary echoed biblical ideas that the Church has long understood to be part of what God invites us to do in Advent to prepare OUR hearts for Christmas. So in addition to looking at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion by giving her COMFORT, ENCOURAGEMENT, and DELIVERANCE, we move on today to see how God gave her a spirit of EXPECTATION.

This is because God wants to do more than just change the present experiences of our lives, making our lives just a little better than they were in the past. God wants our present to keep getting better and better, until it is restored to the full goodness He intended it to have when He first created us. For that to happen, however, we need to allow God to help us envision how the future might be better than the present, as well as how to get to that better future through the power of God’s grace. To see this we turn to the phrase from Mary’s song printed at the top of your bulletin: “*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever.*”

For just as children around the world will go to sleep tomorrow night with the expectation of what Santa might be bringing them on Christmas Day of 2018 because of what Santa brought them on Christmas Day of 2017, Christmas Day of 2016, and on Christmas Day for as many years back as they can remember, so Mary was given a spirit of expectation about what would be happening in the near future by remembering what God had done in ages past in fulfilling the promises He had made to Abraham. To see how expectation is being spoken about in the phrase “*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever,*” we need to dig a little however.

In that digging, we may recall that God called Abraham to leave the place of his birth, and journey to an unknown place. When he arrived in that new place, God promised him that he would be given that new land for his new home. Since other people already lived there, this was not a simple promise to keep however. God would have to bring about a lot of things for that promise to be fulfilled. Which is just what God did, and the descendants of Abraham eventually entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

We may also recall that God promised Abraham that he would give him children as numerous as the stars. Since Abraham and his wife Sarah were both elderly when that promise was made, this was an even less simple promise to keep. In fact, it was so unlikely a promise to be fulfilled that Abraham and Sarah struggled to have faith that it would one day come true. And yet, once again, that is just what God did, and they had a miracle child named Isaac given to them.

Finally, we may recall that God promised Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. This was even less likely than the promise of children to an elderly couple. This is because Abraham was not a great king. Nor was he a member of the upper tier of society. He was just an average guy. And yet, through the ensuing generations of his descendants living in the land that had been promised to them, they (especially through descendants like David and Solomon), came to have an influence upon the entire world.

As we turn our thoughts back to Mary, we may also recall that in the part of Mary's song we are looking at today, Mary sang out that God has "*helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants FOREVER.*" For in that last word, FOREVER, lies the key to the spirit of expectation. This is because the God who promised Abraham a land to dwell in was going to continue to fulfill that promise through Mary. And the God who told Abraham that He was going to give him children as numerous as the stars was going to not only continue to fulfill that promise through Mary, but would do so through her son - the One who would come to be known as nothing less than "*the Son of God.*" And the God who had told Abraham He was going to bless the nations of the world through him was not only going to fulfill that promise through Mary's special son, but also so honor her part in that process that she could burst forth in song, saying "*my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for . . . from now on all generations will call me blessed.*"

As we think about such joyful expectation in a person's life, we may find it hard to fathom. We know God has been with us in days past. We know God has blessed us in the present. And we know God will continue to do good things for us. But in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and especially in the midst of the problems that can arise in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, we can sometimes lose sight of such things. But that doesn't have to be the case.

If we are willing to have faith in the fact that God wants us to wake up each day and sing a song of COMFORT, a song of ENCOURAGEMENT, and a song of DELIVERANCE, we can cover Mary's song of EXPECTATION as well. For while we live in a dark and dreary world, the light of Christ can dispel that darkness. The way we begin singing that song of EXPECTATION is to therefore

learn - as Mary did - that we need to expect God to do great things in us, for us, and through us, and then act - in faith - on that expectation.

Returning to the portions of my life path that I have shared with you over the last few weeks, those events (and many others like them) have provided me with the incentive to do just that in MY life. For like Mary looking back at what God had done for Abraham, I can look back and see what God has done for me along the way. I can look at the events of my life, and see how God has always provided me with a home. I can look at the events of my life, and see how God has always worked things out for me, even when they seemed impossible to solve. And I can look at the events of my life, and see how God working in me, for me, and through me, has had an impact on other people, and enabled them to sing their own song of praise to God.

I'm sure you can do the same thing as you review your life - if you are willing to do so. I am sure you can look back at the events of your life, and see how God has always provided you with a home. I am sure you can look back at the events of your life, and see how God has always worked things out, even when they seemed impossible to solve. And I am sure you can look back at the events of your life, and see how God working in you, for you, and through you, has had an impact on other people, enabling them to sing their own song of praise to God.

This is because it was not just Mary to whom God promised that "*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" He will do so for all who are willing to rise up each day and sing "*my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" May we, therefore, make the decision this Advent to rise up each day and cover Mary's song, not just repeating her words, but making them our own in everything we say and do.