Messengers: The Angel of Annunciation Memory Verse: Luke 1:37

December 3rd, 2023 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 59:1-8

SLIDE 1: Title

Today we arrive once again into the season of Advent. It’s a time of waiting, of preparation…of prayer. Last year, at this time we began something called P.A.X. team. It stands for Prayer Awakens Expectation, and the whole idea is for us as Christians, to engage together in prayer, to simply pray more! We want to lift up this church body, to lift up one another, to stir within us a sense of expectation, a sense that God is alive and active in this world and he is up to something! Amen! We do not walk through this life on our own. And today, as we enter into Advent, we have the opportunity to remind ourselves of the amazing way our good God came to us in our brokenness, in our darkness, and gave us the gift of life.

All of last month we talked about the power and necessity of testimony. We need to hear each other’s stories! We need to know how God is at work in one another’s lives! Before that, we watched season one of “The Chosen” as we saw again how the gospels, indeed the whole bible testifies to the truth of God’s kingdom. And now in Advent, we are going to continue to listen carefully to testimony as we turn our attention to the Messengers who deliver God’s word; the messengers of Advent.

Our world is fraught with messages, and somehow, they are all urgent! They all need our attention right now! You need to pay for this! You need to buy that before supplies run out! You need to update your paperwork! You need to register! You need to get this on your calendar! You need to pay attention to this noisy thing in your life that constantly fights for you attention. We get so many messages in a day, and so many of them are false alarms or they are unimportant. That’s what we have filters on our phones and junk folders for our email. We don’t want to spend our time sifting through all the nonsense just so we can hope to come across a message that actually matters.

Church can potentially be the same way. It very common for us to refer to the sermon as the message and so the preacher is a messenger. But what sort of message do we carry? What is the job of a messenger? A messenger is simply a middleman. If you think about kings in medieval times needing to communicate, they send a messenger. What would happen if the messenger decides to interject his own take and presents a message that is not actually what the king intended to say? What kind of messenger would that be? Today, we have an app on our phones called “Messenger”. What kind of usefulness would it have if those providing the service somehow changed or altered the messages being sent? No one has time for the confusion that would result. Or what would we think of a mailman who inserts their own words into someone else’s letter? Such acts are against the law because we consider tampering to be a punishable offense. The prophets of the Old Testament were tasked with delivering God’s message as he spoke it. They were not writers, they were messengers. They did not speak on their own. So we must ask the same question: what message does the person in the pulpit proclaim? This is where I shallow hard and approach this job with fear and trembling because I serve a King who will not tolerate tampering. I serve a God who has a message for his people. Am I going to testify to that message or spend my time as a writer and make something up? God forbid I fail in my task. Woe to me if I decide to garble his message.

**SLIDE 2: Angel of the Annunciation**

This Advent we are going to listen to four distinct messengers who come to faithfully live out their task. And the first is the Angel of the Annunciation; ol’ Gabriel himself. Now, on this side of heaven, we have many questions about angels. There is a lot of bad information strewn about in the world of Christmas movies and decorations. We like to think of angels as basically beautiful people with wings and a halo. Some of us have even been told that our beloved relatives who have passed away have now received their angel wings.

While there is a lot of mystery surrounding angels, there are some things we do know…First, angels are heavenly beings. The word “angel” literally means “messenger” and that is their function, to serve God as messengers. They are not human and they are not specifically created in God’s image as we are. They can however, assume human form as we see in Genesis 18, when Abraham and Sarah are visited by three messengers who announce a soon coming child to the elderly, barren couple. Genesis 32, when Jacob wrestles with an angel at a place he called Peniel meaning “Face of God”, or when Joshua meets a soldier before they miraculously overc\take Jericho. The book of Hebrews calls angels “ministering spirits” and encourages believers to be hospitable and generous because we might not know whether we are hosting an angel or not. They could be among us, and if they are, they have a message to deliver. But we are cautioned in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, that angels are not to be worshipped. That is reserved for God alone. Angels rejoice when people come to faith, and they helped Jesus himself while he was being tempted in the wilderness and they were present at the empty tomb. Angels are God’s heavenly helpers, his messengers who live eternally in unceasing praise to God. As such, angels are not to be trifled with. We know from Daniel 10 that they engage in battle against the spiritual forces of darkness in this world, and the Old Testament speaks of God’s angel armies. They are powerful and convey the holiness of the God they live to serve. Every encounter people have with an angel incites fear. Every time an angel speaks, they have to preface their message with the words, “Do not be afraid.”

**SLIDE 3: “Do not be afraid.”**

So with this swath of biblical information, we turn specifically to one young woman’s encounter with a messenger of the Lord. Turn to Luke 1:26 READ 26-27.

**SLIDE 4: 26When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, 27to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary.**

 So Luke’s story begins with a an old priest named Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth. Gabriel, one of only two angels named in the bible, speaks to them about having a son and naming the child John. Now, here in verse 26, we see a direct sequel to the previous encounter. Different town, different woman and like most sequels it’s the same plot with a twist. Gabriel shows up to this little rural village of Nazareth, to a young fiancé named Mary. Certainly she looks forward to having children, but that time is still to come. We also note that Luke wants us to know that this young Mary is going to become attached to the lineage of David once she is married; a rather important detail.

Then Gabriel speaks READ 28-33.

**SLIDE 5:  When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”**

 So this is good news. Mary is supposed to rejoice and consider herself favored by God. Gabriel foretells of the birth of a son to be named Jesus. Same plot point, different name. But let’s take a moment and consider these names. Zechariah and Elizabeth are told to name their son John. This was a surprise because it was a name that had no place in their family or among their relatives, but John was a specific request of God via his messenger. John means, “God is gracious”. Let me read for you verses 15-17. This is Gabriel telling Zechariah about what this son of his will do. READ.

**SLIDE 6: for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**

He will bring many back to the Lord. He will turn hearts and bring about righteous thinking…he will make ready God’s people. Isn’t this the epitome of grace? To turn back to the Lord and find forgiveness? To be made ready for what God has in store? John is compared to the brash and raucous Elijah, a loud, bold man who could be identified simply by his manner of dress. Does this sound like someone who brings a message of God’s grace? Yes, according to his very namesake, he does. And now Gabriel announces another baby to be named Jesus, meaning God saves. Good news indeed! God is gracious and he saves! Can you imagine if Gabriel decided he liked some other names better? If he reneged his sacred duty and inserted his own message? The result would be a garbled story, a clouded picture of God’s plan for this world. But thankfully Gabriel is a faithful messenger with clear words from God. God is gracious and he saves. “Jesus will be called the Son of the Most High, he will sit on the throne of David, he will rule over Jacob and there will be no end to his kingdom.” This is a lot of information to drop here. A lot of important names being thrown around: King David and Jacob, who was renamed Israel. There is talk of a kingdom and something about the Most High? Mary is just a girl from Nazareth looking forward to her wedding. What was going on? READ 34.

 Mary has a very logical question, and she makes sure that Gabriel knows her life circumstances. “Yes, kids will be coming, but not right now. This sounds like a fine, post-wedding plan.” But, true to his duty, Gabriel reports God’s message. READ 35-37

**SLIDE 7: The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.**

 Have you ever been in the position of having to tell someone something that was absolutely absurd? Years ago, my wife and I lived in Winona, MN which is just a long trip down highway 61. I was in seminary at the time and had to make a few trips up to the Twin Cities for classes. It’s not a bad drive. It’s beautiful and scenic, but there is one major snag in the whole trip, a little place called Lake City. You know what they say, “You’re gonna get doused in Lake City.” They are just always pulling people over! I knew this from experience as I approached the town, but sure enough, as I was leaving the city limits I got snagged and ticked in that little limbo area between speed limit signs. So there I was miffed about my rotten luck when low and behold I made it to Hastings and noticed flashing lights in my rearview. Here I was being pulled over again! Same night, same road. I was given a warning this time and thanked the officer for his graciousness. As I continued my way to St. Paul I tried to wrap my mind around the conversation I would have later with my wife. She already thinks I’m a lousy driver and this would not come off as humorous at all. How was I supposed to tell her such an absurd story? How would I deliver such news? Well, my wife is very patient with me and she took the news quite well.

Can we put ourselves in Gabriel’s wings for just a minute? Can you imagine him in the heavenly courts getting his assignment, being told it’s extra important. He probably checked the address multiple times…”oh, yeah, it does say Nazareth. Let’s see, here, oh okay, another birth announcement. Those always bring such joy, so that should be fun…wait, a virgin…wait, What? How is THAT going to work? Maybe I should make sure there has been no mistake here. This doesn’t make sense, but that’s the message huh? Well, I can remind her of Elizabeth’s story and I’ll just reiterate at the end that nothing is impossible for God. That’s the truth after all. This is definitely a first but I’m sure this will go over just fine...humans are great at handling change.

 And Gabriel is off to deliver a message of hope to the entire universe through one girl. The King is about to come, and his kingdom will never end. The Son of the Most High, God’s Son who himself will be a messenger. Gabriel has a job to do: deliver an absurd and impossible message…a virgin will conceive and bear a Son. But he speaks to Mary with a graceful sternness. This is no joke , not some sort of trick. You, Mary, are honored by God. This is something new, never to have happened before and never to happen again! It’s insane, and absurd, but it is true. Nothing is impossible for God! Do you believe that Mary? Do you believe that reader of Luke? Do you believe that follower of Jesus? Nothing is impossible for God.

**SLIDE 8: Nothing is impossible for God.**

 Just as Gabriel is a messenger of Advent, so are we messengers in our own context. We have received words from God, words of hope and life, words of redemption and light, words of good news! But there is a problem…to many, to most even, these words sound absurd. God came as a human baby at Christmas just to take on our sins and die on a cross. Then that dead man, who is also the Son of God, rose again from the grave and now offers those who believe eternal life. It sounds impossible. It sounds absurd, because it is!

 Paul reminds us right off the bat in 1 Corinthians that the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God, the impossible, the absurd, power of God! Nothing is impossible for him! If a virgin can have a baby, then sinners can be forgiven, and hard hearts can be softened, and sickness can be healed and the dead can rise to eternal life! This is the message that we are called to share! And I might not be able to do all the things Gabriel does…as he presumably flies around and exists in the very presence of God’s glory and commands angel squadrons…but I can share the message of salvation, I can faithfully speak the good news as Gabriel did. I can share this impossible message from a God who makes all things possible. Oh God, may I be a faithful messenger willing to deliver your word. Amen.