

Ready to Receive
December 21st, 2014

Luke 1:26-38
Advent 4 B

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Well, Christmas is only a handful of days away. Are you ready? Do you have all the right gifts bought and wrapped? All the food planned and purchased? Got any driving itineraries ready, you know where you have to be and when? As all-out as we go for our Christmas celebration, it's not something you can do off the cuff if you want to keep up with the norms of society. The entire month or more has probably been littered with extra work you've put on yourself to be ready. It's something you really have to prepare for with some forethought.

So what goes through your mind when you hear that question? Are you ready? For me it's a small shot of panic followed by me going down a mental list of everything that needs to be done, everything I'm responsible for, and comparing that to what I have done already and what I've yet to do. Even when we're not talking about Christmas, that's usually what happens.

I bring this up because this is the last Sunday of our Advent season, and throughout the whole season we speak of being prepared. Are you prepared, are you ready? Not to celebrate Christmas, but are you ready for the return of Christ? We keep talking about being prepared for this, and God himself does the same whenever he talks about the coming end. He says be prepared, be on guard, be ready because you don't know when it's coming.

So...we've been at this for a month, are you ready?

The problem is that the question is misleading. After all, as I just said, what pops into your mind when you are asked if you're ready for something? All the work you have to do to make it happen and whether or not you've done it. But being ready for the Savior doesn't work like that. It's almost a trick question because of the way our brains usually think about it. But the reality of being ready for Christ is so much better and simpler than the frenzy of holiday preparation we put ourselves through. To see this readiness in action, let's take a look again at our gospel for today: <read text: Luke 1:26-38>.

This was it. The start of the big crescendo of God's plan through history. The overture happened in the Garden of Eden and the plan was set in motion from that very first promise of a Savior. Since then, the plan had been building, bit by bit throughout history. God would send a Savior at the right time, and over thousands and thousands of years, little details about him were made clearer by God as he worked and guided history to a point where everything would be in place for exactly the plan he wanted to accomplish. And now it was time. There was a sting of warning about six months prior when Zechariah found out he was going to have a son who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. But now with Mary it was well and truly beginning.

The greatest and most important period in history was about to play out. God was going to save everyone. Everything that had gone before this was just preparation for this time. All time that would come after would be looking back to this event. Human history focused here. And if anyone knew hope or joy in earnest it was because of what was happening here. The most significant part of human history was beginning...and what did the first key player have to do to make it happen?

Nothing.

The angel of the Lord appeared, told Mary what was going to happen, and when Mary had a question of how this might be done, the angel basically told her that God would take care of it. Because God could take care of it. Nothing is impossible with God, and that is how this could be done. And Mary's response was entirely appropriate. She let it happen. Not that she could get in the way of God and his plans, but she simply accepted what God had decided and believed God when he said something would happen. She didn't do anything, she simply was there to receive what God had decided to give her.

And what about mankind in general? The race as a whole had made a mess, brought sin into the world, perpetuated it further and further. They had ruined it, so what monumental feat would be required of the human race to bring the Savior to them. What would they have to do in order to convince God that they should be rescued? How would they get God to show them favor and rescue them from death? What must they do to prepare everything for the Savior?

Nothing.

Jesus was coming without human enticing and even in the face of human resistance. He would carry out his work because he chose to. Not because we gave him a reason to. Not because we did some amazing prep work that made him want to be here. And not with any kind of assistance from human beings. All we could do was stand by and watch.

And so what about you? What do you have to do to be ready for the Savior? To get him to save you personally? Leave cookies out for him? Be good all year round? Make sure you're in church every week and pray to him twice a

day? Does that make him come to you? Does that accomplish everything that he'll need done before he gets back? What can you do to be ready for the Savior?

Nothing.

Sensing a pattern yet?

There is nothing we do to prepare for Christ. There is nothing we do to be saved. All the doing we ever talk about in our lives as Christians comes after we are ready. It comes after we're saved by him. After we have been prepared by God.

God does it all. It is all on him and it can only be that way. Not that he started it of course. We are the reason it had to be done. Where God has brought us his will and his word before, he says simply, "Listen to me, trust me." And we in our own wisdom have thrown that away. No, we don't want to listen to what God has to say, he ruins all the fun. We know what we want right now and we know that it won't hurt anything if we go after it. We know best. God may try to tell us that good stuff is going to happen but we're not going to buy that. Rather than listen to God when he speaks and simply accept it like Mary did, by nature we dismiss it out of hand and go our own way. For defying our Creator and our King, we deserve death.

It was the damage we did. But it was God who fixed it all.

It was God who watched over human history from Adam and Eve to Joseph and Mary. Who guided and directed the course of individual lives as well as he did the nations. Who spoke when he needed to, intervened when necessary but all the while orchestrated everything to the point where the time had fully come. When there would be a government in place that occupied most of the known world and none of the inter-nation warfare that would have prevented Jesus from wandering freely or his message from spreading easily after he was done.

And when the time was right, it was God himself, without prompting or enticing from any of us, who acted despite our total unworthiness, it was God who left the glory of his heavenly throne and lowered himself to be born as a helpless infant. And not in a palace or even a house. In a stable for animals, likely no more than a cave. The infinite creator became a human being, allowed himself to be limited by our weaknesses and wants.

And in that human frame he lived. He ate and drank and slept and grew, he walked and talked and taught and helped. Where not one of us is capable of living even a day without acting selfishly, he lived with a perfect love for his neighbor at all times. Where we cannot give up our desire to be our own god by nature, he honored the Father and his will at every moment. When tempted, he overcame. And he did it without any of our help.

And when the time was right, when the lamb without blemish or defect was the right age, he gave up that life. While human being taunted him, goaded him into coming down from the cross and giving up his mission, while the human beings he was dying for nailed him and hung him, he chose willingly to be hoisted in the air, and there somehow to bear the infinite wrath of God for every sin ever committed, including those committed against him at that very moment. He suffered the abandonment of God, he knew hell itself. We gave him no reason to, and did nothing to make it possible. And when it was finished, he chose to give up his spirit and die.

And on the third day, he took that life back. None of us gave it to him. None of us helped him. He laid his life down, he took it back up again. And in rising from the dead he proclaimed to us the gospel, the good news; really the greatest news. That mankind stood forgiven before the Creator because of what God had done for them. This was a gift, earned without our deserving or helping. And it is freely given to all.

The only way this gift is lost is if it is refused. And even though by nature we would all choose to refuse God's grace, he came to you personally, he came to you through water and word and he opened your hand to receive his gift. We call this faith. Are you ready? Yes. Because all you do is receive what God has earned for you.

This is what it means to be prepared for Jesus. This is what it means to be ready for him. It means that you look to God and let him do everything to rescue you. Now, this doesn't mean we sit idle with our heads in the clouds. Now that we know we are ready to receive Christ, there is work to be done here, primarily letting God work through us to get others ready!

But the greatest gift we could ever want and ever need is given to us. It is given without strings or debt. God prepared this gift especially for you and he has made you able to receive it. Look to him with trusting hands open and you are ready to receive everything he has for you. Amen.