

Hymn Sing

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Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN



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"THE DAYS OF HEROD"

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ... (Luke 1:5a)

"In the days of Herod," says Luke. It's easy to skip over those words, to treat them as a date and nothing more. Yet if we do that, we miss something important.

Who was this Herod, king of Judea? Well, he was a genius in some ways—a great builder in particular. But that's not all he was. Here are some other words that fit. Foreign ruler. Lavish spender. Conniver. Madman. Murderer. Killer of his wife and children.

Given the history of Herod, Luke is probably not just setting a date. He is reminding us what those days were like. Can you imagine living under such a ruler? Dark days indeed. It would be easy to lose hope. It would be easy to feel abandoned by God, left to suffer in a meaningless world.

But that was exactly the time God chose to send the angel Gabriel to Zechariah. "You will have a son," he said. "Your son will get people ready for the coming of the Lord." The light is about to dawn in the darkness. God has not forgotten His people!

We, too, live in dark days. War. Abuse. Greed. Lies. Racism. Terrorism. It's easy to be terrified at what is coming upon our world.

And yet, God says to us, "Look up. I have not abandoned you. I am sending My Son Jesus to be your Savior. He will destroy the powers of darkness and rescue you from evil. Darkness will not have the last word. My Son shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome Him" (see John 1:5).

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, when we are afraid, help us to hope in Your Son Jesus. Amen.

"EMBARRASSING"

December 7, 2019

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:18-20)

Poor Zechariah! Doomed to go down in history as the man who could argue against God's promise, even at the very moment he was face-to-face with an angel. How embarrassing! How undignified!

But notice how God responds. He doesn't dump Zechariah and find someone else to be John's father.

Instead, with considerable patience, the angel says, "Hello! I'm Gabriel, an angel, yes? I stand in God's presence, yes? He sent me, yes? Got all that straight? Okay, let's move forward. This good news is really going to happen!"

Zechariah may pay a price for his foolishness, but God still chooses to work through him. The good news is still true. John will be born—the way will be prepared—and ultimately, Jesus will come to save us.

This can comfort us when we feel like poor excuses for Christians. Jesus has no pride. After all, He is the One who laid aside His glory and came into the world as a helpless human baby, naked and hungry. He is the One who hung on a shameful cross for our sake. He is the One who rose from the dead in power and glory—only to be mistaken for a gardener by the first person to meet Him.

Having done all of that for us, He will certainly take us into His kingdom, even if He has to drag us whining the whole way. He loves us that much.

THE PRAYER: Lord, teach us to trust in You when believing is a difficult thing to do. Amen.

"ON A SCHEDULE"

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27)

I love the way this passage starts: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God ..." I have an absurd picture in my mind, of Gabriel counting the months of Elizabeth's pregnancy on his fingers, and then hearing God say, "Time to go." It reminds me how closely God watches over our lives—even when it looks like He's not paying any attention at all.

Because we often feel that way, don't we? We look around at our ordinary lives and find it hard to believe that the Creator of the universe could be bothered to keep track of us, much less be interested. Or if we are suffering through grief or pain, we may feel abandoned—even deliberately abandoned by God. Where is He?

Against our feelings, the Bible tells us that God is in fact watching over us—far more closely than we may give Him credit for. "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered," says Jesus (Matthew 10:30). "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands," says God (Isaiah 49:15-16a).

Indeed, He has done this literally. As God come into the world in human flesh, Jesus bears our marks on His very hands—the nail marks of His crucifixion, the guarantee of the great love He has for us. Even now that He has risen from the dead, He still carries those marks. Truly, He will never forget us, and never overlook us.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, help me to truly grasp and believe that You came into this world for me—me personally. Amen.

"GREATLY TROUBLED"

And he 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. (Luke 1:28-29)

Mary was greatly troubled by the angel's greeting. Well, who wouldn't be? There she was, probably doing her daily work in her mother's house—cooking, cleaning, carrying water, just like any other day. Then suddenly an angel comes in, and says, "Greetings, O favored one!"

Favored one? There she was, an ordinary girl in a nondescript town in the backlands of Galilee. She might have been holding a broom or a cooking spoon at that very moment. She knew she was nobody special. Favored one? Had the angel got a wrong number?

But he explained right away. "The Lord is with you," he said. It is as if the angel said, *"You belong to God, and He is pleased with you, and you are never apart from Him. And soon He will be with you in an entirely new way—as a human baby developing inside your own body."* Favored? Oh, yes!

We too are favored, and for the same reason. Not because we are anybody special, but because the Lord Himself is with us. He has chosen to be with us—to become a human baby, to grow up to save us through His suffering and death, and to rise again. He has joined Himself to humanity forever, and He will never desert us.

Specifically, He has joined Himself to you—for you are a baptized child of God who trusts in Jesus and belongs to Him forever. Yes, you are favored. The Lord of everything has drawn you close to Him.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, help me realize that You are always with me. Bring me closer to You in trust and love. Amen.

"JESUS FOR YOU"

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."
(Luke 1:30-33)

Notice what the angel says to Mary—or rather, what he doesn't say. The angel doesn't say, "The pre-existent Son of God, the Source of your existence, is beginning His incarnation and the redemption of the cosmos." Imagine Mary's face if he had said that!?

No, he explains what God is doing in a way Mary can understand. Mary knows about pregnancy and babies and what it means to raise them. And as a good Jewish girl, she knows all about the coming Messiah, the Savior of her people.

What God is saying to Mary was this: "This Jesus is for you." He is for you personally, not for far-off theologians or professors at some college. He is your Savior. He is God-with-you, both your child and your Lord.

And God goes on saying this to each one of us, doesn't He? This Jesus is your Savior—the One who is with you in your troubled life and sets you free from the power of evil. He is the One who will walk with you even through death. He will raise you—*you personally!*—from the dead on the day that He comes back, because you are His and He is yours.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You that You have given Yourself to me as my Savior. Amen.

"A COURTEOUS GOD, AND A WILLING RESPONSE"

December 13, 2019

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

If you stop to think about it, God didn't have to tell Mary what He was going to do. He didn't have to explain anything at all. Oh, no doubt Mary would have been surprised and frightened to find herself pregnant with no explanation of how it happened—but after all, Mary is a human being, and she has to do what God wants. Right?

And yet—that is not the kind of God we have, One who runs roughshod over us, caring about nothing but His own power and glory. One of the old Greek gods would have behaved like that—if they were real. But not this God, not the true God. He asks first.

Why? Because this is God's nature—to be gentle, to show mercy, to treat even the least of His creatures as incredibly valuable. Mary has a high value in God's eyes. You have a high value in God's eyes. God will not treat you carelessly. He loves you. That is why He sent His Son Jesus to rescue you!

God has done everything. Jesus was born among us. He lived and served and taught and healed—and then He lay down His life for us on the cross, to make us God's own. He rose from the dead. And now He offers us eternal life, to everyone who will believe in Him.

But God will not force His hand. Instead, He offers Himself to us. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, we say willingly, "Yes, Lord. I am Yours."

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, give me Your Spirit's help to respond to You with joy and gladness. Amen.

"FOUND OUT"

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

The Holy Spirit never says anything by accident. That's why the words in Matthew 1 are so disturbing: Mary "*was found* to be with child." What lies behind those words, "was found"? It doesn't sound like she had the chance to break the news gently. It sounds rather like someone found out—like there was a shocking moment of discovery.

And we know what goes with those moments, don't we? Terror. Anger. Yelling. Disbelief. A great deal of pain. Family upset. I rather doubt Mary's home was a happy place, at least for a while.

Of course, Mary had a perfectly innocent explanation—though given human nature, I wonder how many people believed her.

In times like these God will never abandon us, no matter what we are found to have done. He says, "Come to Me," and He means it. He will not shout at us. He will not ask us unanswerable questions like "Why?" He will receive us, wash us, heal us, and make us new. He will keep us as His own forever.

With Jesus our Savior, there is never any "found out." There is only "found"—we are found safe, in Him.

THE PRAYER: Dearest Lord, hold on to me when I am terrified and ashamed. Amen.

THE BEST HE COULD OFFER"

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

Mary loved her baby. You can see it in her actions. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes—these were strips of cloth that mothers used to bind their babies so they would grow up straight and strong. And of course, she wanted the best for her baby. So she must have packed them, back in Nazareth, in case of need. They weren't silk or satin, but they were the best she could offer.

Joseph loved the baby, too. We can see that by all the hard work he went to, to keep Jesus and His mother safe. Was it he who brought over the manger so that Jesus could have a safe place to sleep and Mary wouldn't have to worry about Him? It seems likely. He couldn't provide Jesus with a crib or cradle, but he could at least get Him off the floor. It was the best he could offer.

And God the Father? Ah, His love was the best of all. For He also provided the best He could offer—Jesus Himself, our Savior. God did not send us an angel. He did not send a wise and holy man, or a great leader, or an epic hero. He sent His own Son Jesus into the flesh: God incarnate born as a human baby.

Jesus offered Himself up for our sakes—from the first day of His life to the last. He offered Himself at the cross in order to destroy the power of sin, death, and the devil. He brought the whole human race out from under those terrible powers. And when He rose from the dead, He guaranteed that whoever trusts in Him will have the best of the best—will become a child of God and enjoy His love, and deep, joyful, meaningful life, forever.

Who could offer anything more?

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for Jesus. Take my heart and help me to trust in Your Son forever. Amen.

"BORN TO YOU"

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:8-11)

It's a strange phrasing the angel used: "unto *you* is born" a baby. That's usually what we say to a parent, right? Not to some set of strangers who've never so much as met the family. But the angel had it right, because this was the one baby who was born to every human being in the world.

The ancient Israelites had family office called "kinsman-redeemer." This was the person you needed if you got into trouble or lost all your money. The kinsman-redeemer had the legal right to buy your property back from the new owner. He could buy you back as well, if you got sold into slavery. He was allowed to do this because he was related to you. The closer the relationship, the more right he had to rescue you.

A kinsman-redeemer is exactly what we need as human beings. Once all of us were under the power of the devil, living as slaves to guilt and shame and sin. We needed help. But who could do it? We got ourselves into that situation—by rights it ought to be fixed by a human being. But no human being was in a position to pay. God could pay—but He was not human. By being born into our human family, Jesus fixed that problem. He became our Kinsman-Redeemer, our blood relative who has the right and the ability to buy us back out of slavery.

So yes, Jesus is born to the shepherds—and to me—and to you. He is born to all of us, as close kin as our own children, as generous and loving as the best relative you ever had or dreamed of. And because He became our kin, now we can become His kin—children of God, sharing His everlasting life and joy.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for coming to be my Redeemer. Thank You for being born to me. Amen.

"DRAGGING FEET?"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. (Luke 2:15-16)

Nobody had to hurry up the shepherds. "They went with haste" to Bethlehem, the story says. They hurried themselves up. They were looking forward to getting to their goal—finding the baby Jesus that God had told them about. And when they saw Him, they were happy.

It's still like that for us now, isn't it? Tell us to "hurry up" to something unpleasant and it's just not happening. Our feet may move quickly, but our hearts stay behind. But give us a reason to move—a party, a new movie, an all-you-can-eat buffet—and it's amazing how quickly everyone takes off. The house is empty in seconds.

God knows this about us. And so He calls us to Him with love and mercy, not with anger and threats. Jesus says, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

In another place He says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

You are wanted by God—deeply, truly wanted. He calls you to Him. He is not planning to scold or punish you when you get there. Instead, He is giving you a Gift—the best gift of all—our Savior Jesus, to be your own.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, bring me to You with trust and joy, to receive Your blessings. Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

