

## **Rejoice, Rejoice**

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Luke 1:26-38

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### *Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26*

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.  
I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;  
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.  
You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to my servant David:  
"I will establish your descendants forever,  
and build your throne for all generations."' '

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:

'I have set the crown on one who is mighty,  
I have exalted one chosen from the people.  
I have found my servant David;  
with my holy oil I have anointed him;  
my hand shall always remain with him;  
my arm also shall strengthen him.  
The enemy shall not outwit him,  
the wicked shall not humble him.  
I will crush his foes before him  
and strike down those who hate him.  
My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;  
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.  
I will set his hand on the sea  
and his right hand on the rivers.  
He shall cry to me, "You are my Father,  
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!"

### *Luke 1:26-38*

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

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Barbara Robinson’s classic children’s book, *‘The Best Christmas Pageant Ever’*<sup>i</sup> is absurdly funny as her story begins with what is bound to be the worst Christmas pageant ever but incredibly it does become the best ever. The six Herdman siblings: Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys, have a reputation for being “the worst kids in the history of the world.” They manage to take over the annual Christmas pageant while looking for free snacks, and before everything all works out for the best, they have set fire to a toolshed, blackmailed someone and hit a woman over the head. It’s obvious that they’re up to no good. But Christmas magic is all around and the Herdmans, who have never heard the Christmas story before, start to reimagine it in their own way.

I was gifted a copy of this book many years ago when I directed our church Christmas pageant for the first time. Our version did not include six criminals-in-the-making or any of the other hijinks and chaos as in the book, but we certainly had our own path to potentially the worst Christmas pageant ever. Mary and Joseph were played by a feuding sister and brother, and when ‘Joseph’ got mad at ‘Mary’ during rehearsal, he ripped the head off of the baby doll cast at Jesus. On the night of the pageant, shepherds’ staves were briefly used as swords in a duel as the kids were getting their costumes on, and some of the garland halos were temporarily lost. During the pageant itself an angel pouted and refused to hark her herald because she did not like her wings. The innkeeper changed history by telling Joseph that there *was* room in the inn. And after the pageant we encountered a bit of controversy as our baby Jesus had been played by a baby girl.

In spite of all the crazy mishaps, forgotten lines and shepherds wearing Dad’s-too-big-bathrobe, there is something Christmas magical about the pageants. It is more than creating cherished memories, more than an adorable and nostalgic holiday event. It’s the innocence of childhood at what is often the most exciting, joyful and wonderful time of the year. It is seeing the oh-so-familiar story anew from those who are just learning what Christmas is really all about. It immerses each of us into the Gospel, into each part of the story, hearing and seeing what we have before but now in a different voice and way. It is remembering our own childhood perceptions and misperceptions when we too asked as Mary did, ‘how can this be?’

Yet there is a deep truth in the midst of the awkwardness of Christmas pageants because they reflect the awkwardness of the very events they are portraying. Telling the story that weaves together Jesus’ birth as foreshadowed by David and Isaiah and as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke is the tale of the impossible possible that is still hard for us—at any age—to understand and to grasp. We are perplexed. It is awkward to consider how Mary, the favored one, could be both mother of Jesus and, at the same time, the child of Jesus, who is Lord of us all<sup>ii</sup>. It is awkward to try to understand that Mary immediately was at peace with the Messiah as an infant that she would carry in her womb, give birth to, nurse and care for, although the people all along had been waiting for the strong, heroic warrior Messiah to save the people from oppression and tyranny. Without hesitation she signed onto a lifetime of both great joy and deep suffering and pain as the mother of God. It is awkward to imagine and comprehend such a bold, radical, eternity-changing annunciation to a young teenage girl, and her courageous, faithful acceptance, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

It had been about 1000 years,<sup>iii</sup> 40 generations, from the time the psalmist sang of God's steadfast love established forever with the house, the line of David, rejoicing in the forever covenant made with the chosen one, the exalted one chosen from the people, yet somehow Mary could quickly accept that she, after all of this time, was the exalted one chosen from the people to bring this covenant, this life, into being.

It is also awkward to imagine the risks that Joseph took over and over, beginning with the news that Mary was pregnant by the power of God, and traveling to Bethlehem for the census and fleeing from Herod and into Egypt. We watch the shepherds, who know how to behave in a stable, but of course know nothing about how to approach a king. We watch the Magi, who of course know how to behave around a king, but know nothing about what to do in a stable.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, when we have lit the candle of Joy, when we rejoice with Mary's faithful 'yes', we do not have a Christmas pageant, but we can still have our awkward questions and perplexing wonderings about the impossible possible.

What will Christmas be like for us this year, what will it mean? What will it look like for Christ to be born, and for him to be reborn within us? What will it be like for us to face the reality that God has kept God's promises and come to his world-and to each one of us?

In a sense, Advent is God's invitation to new and renewed life with him. Meister Eckhart, German theologian and mystic, wrote in the 13th century, "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace, if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to His Son, if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?"<sup>iv</sup> Is God inviting you to allow Christ to be born anew in you, in our time and place?

Greetings favored ones! The Lord is with you. Ready or not, awkward or not, no garland halos or shepherds staffs or overside bathrobes required. God has great hopes and dreams for you. The Holy Spirit is with you and will guide you into all truth that you may be a blessing to this world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Robinson, Barbara, ' *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever : A Christmas Holiday Book for Kids (The Best Ever)* ', HarperCollins, 2005, originally published 1971

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily\\_devotional\\_just\\_when\\_you\\_least\\_expect\\_it/](https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily_devotional_just_when_you_least_expect_it/)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://timeline.biblehistory.com/event/david>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://resurrectioneugene.org/sermon-for-advent-4-december-20-2020-b-2/>