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Luke 1:26-56  
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### Mighty God

Last week, our closing song *Savior of the Nations Come* dated back to the 4th Century AD. It was a time when the church was wrestling with the divinity and humanity of Christ. Amidst a brewing heresy, someone penned this song to put both aspects of Jesus Christ in tension with one another.

This week, our closing song is another ancient Advent hymn. *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. It dates to the 9th Century AD during the Dark Ages referring to the demographic, cultural, and economic deterioration of Western Europe and the decline of the Roman Empire. It was marked by frequent warfare, a virtual disappearance of urban life, intellectual darkness, and barbarity.

*O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is a condensed Biblical view of the Messiah. In its original Latin form, it had seven verses. One verse per day was chanted by the monastic community during the last seven days before Christmas.

It wasn't made famous, however, until 1818 by an Anglican priest named John Mason Neale. Neale was brilliant scholar who could write and speak over twenty different languages. (They just don't make pastor's like they used to. Ha ha.)

He should have been destined for greatness. However, at the time, church leaders...you gotta love us church leaders...thought that he was too evangelical, too progressive, and too much a free thinker to be allowed to influence the masses. So rather than get a pastorate in London, Neale was sent to the Madiera Islands off the northwest coast of Africa. There he began an orphanage, a school for girls, and a house of refuge for prostitutes. Pushed out of the spotlight and given the position of warden in an all but forgotten area, it was expected that Neale and his crazy ideals would never again find root in England.

Certainly not the career Neale had expected or hoped for. Ministering in such obscurity.

It was during this disappointment that he discovered *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. He translated it into English and set it to a fifteenth century tune originated by a community of French Franciscan nuns living in Libson, Portugal. He published it in the 1850's in England and within twenty five years the song grew in popularity throughout Europe and America.<sup>1</sup>

Amazing what our Mighty God can do when things don't work out quite as we hoped or expected. Disappointment is the seedbed from which God does some of his most amazing work.

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<sup>1</sup> Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 127-128,

The same must have been true for Mary, Jesus' mother. A young gal of about 14 or 15. Pledged to be married to a young carpenter named Joseph. A righteous man. A good man. A man after God's own heart. Honestly their future couldn't have been more promising.

And yet. Things don't turn out the way either of them had expected.

Joseph and Mary receive some pretty unsettling news from the angel Gabriel. News that would pop those hopes and dreams in an instant. News that both would have to hang onto a Mighty God to work things out in ways that neither of them could control the outcome.

Last week, we heard how Joseph had decided to divorce Mary quietly until Gabriel encouraged him to stay the course. Hesitant. Confused. Uncertain.

Mary, however, receives this news quite differently.

Would you join me as we read from Luke 1:25-56 and we hear Gabriel's surprising news and Mary's joyful response?

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year. I love the decorations. The food. The gatherings. I think this is true for most folks.

But for those who are grieving, Christmastime can be darn right confusing. All the signals we get from our culture are that we are supposed to be happy, joyful, and full of good will. But what if we're not? What do we do with that?

Grief is a funny thing. We all experience it at some point or another. We all go through grief and its five stages. Denial of or disappointment over our loss. Anger sparked by a sense of being out of control. Bargaining or trying to do everything we can to prevent or mitigate our loss. Depression. And finally acceptance or acknowledgement that there is nothing we will ever be able to do to go back to the way things were.

We don't ever over the loss of a loved one. We just wear our grief differently. It becomes part of us. A new normal.

But while grief is universally experienced, we don't all experience grief the same way. Some of us may move through it quite quickly. Some may get stuck in that grief. Some may skip through stages. Some may linger in certain stages longer than expected. But one thing is true, we all go through it.

How well we go through it depends on our view of God.

Take for example young Mary. She must have experienced grief after receiving the shocking news that she would become pregnant with God's child. How does anyone being to wrap their head around something like that?

But in the story we just heard we get a view not only of Mary and how she moves through her grief, but also a window of her God. A Mighty God who would walk with her through uncertainty. A Mighty God who was powerful and whose

strength has no end. A Mighty God who could illuminate the darkest night. A Mighty God who specialized in doing the impossible. A Mighty God who was all knowing, almighty, ever present. A Mighty God whose faithfulness endures forever.

Do you ever wonder how Mary had developed this image of God? She lived it!

As a faithful Jewish young woman, she most certainly celebrated all the high holidays and knew all of the stories by heart. How their Mighty God had created everything out of nothing. How their Mighty God had destroyed the earth and its inhabitants with a flood. How their Mighty God had saved their people from starvation and bondage in Egypt. How their Mighty God fed them and led them through the wilderness for forty years. How their Mighty God had brought them home to the Promised Land. How their Mighty God brought them out of Babylonian Exile. How their Mighty God had been with them each time their homes had been destroyed by neighboring nations. And now how their Mighty God had not forgotten them under oppressive Roman Rule.

What is our picture of God today? Is he a Mighty God? Or a God that is too small to handle what concerns us?

When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, she is not just troubled but greatly troubled. Agitated. Disturbed. Startled. She is afraid.

And she wondered. Reasoned. Debated. Argued in her head what kind of greeting Gabriel was bringing her.

The fact that Gabriel senses a myriad of emotions from Mary prompts him to say “Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God. This good news I’m bringing you.”

Yes, she questions how it is all going to take place. But notice that her bargaining and depression quickly give way to an acceptance that this is way beyond her control. The fact that Elizabeth her older cousin who was beyond childbearing years was now expecting a child confirmed God’s power and might. If God could produce offspring from that which was said to be barren, God could produce a child in her from nothing as well.

Again it depends on our picture of God. Either our God can do this or our God cannot.

Mary doesn’t try to figure it all out but chooses to rest in that power. She faithfully resigns herself to it. She is open to what God has in store.

“I am the Lord’s servant,” she says. “May it be to me as you have said.”

Do we hear that sense of openness to God’s purpose in Mary’s life?

Are we open to God’s purposes this Advent? How can we spur one another on toward more love and good deeds?

Walter Bruggeman describes what he calls the Rhythms of Life.<sup>2</sup> In other words, there is a cycle through which we travel in which we experience God and God's purposes in our lives. We begin in a season of orientation where everything makes sense. Growing up in the church for example is a season of orientation. We learn in Sunday school that our God is mighty and strong. We become orientated to that truth. We believe it.

From there we often move to disorientation where things no longer make sense or work the way they used to. Going off into the world or to college in young adulthood can be that season of disorientation. We learn that the world is extremely broken and that God often doesn't rescue us from our turmoil. It's then that our Sunday school image of God sometimes gets shattered. Our world collapses. We may feel sunken in a pit or abandoned by God altogether. Feelings of anger, loss, and being out of control are also common in disorientation. No matter how hard we try to get back where we once were, we just can't go back.

The universal Christian Church is in this season of disorientation. We can never go back to what we once were. We can only move forward.

Our final move is that of reorientation when we move out of the pit onto firmer places to stand. It's there that we develop a new understanding of what had happened and who had lifted us up. We realize that God was with us all along, that truly he had never left us, nor forsaken us. We may have a fresh perspective that God's ways are not our ways, nor are God's thoughts our thoughts. They are so much higher. We also come to resign ourselves to God's purposes in our lives. We know deep down in our soul that all is well, and all will be well.

We may even have a new song in our hearts to God.  
One like Mary sang to her cousin Elizabeth.

“I'm bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—  
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.

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<sup>2</sup> Korey Capps wrote about this idea on his blog “Rhythm of Life: Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation.” Posted on October 8, 2014 at <https://korycapps.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/rhythm-of-life-orientation-disorientation-reorientation/>

He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It's exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now."<sup>3</sup>

Do we hear the excitement and openness in Mary's heart that perhaps God was working in ways that neither she nor we understand? She believed that God would right everything that was wrong. That God would take care of her in this less than ideal state. That God would remain faithful to his promises.

Before our Mighty God can birth something new in us, my friends, we must be open to fact that maybe God wants to move us in a way that is much different than we are accustomed to.

Notice that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months before she was ready to return home to deliver Jesus. Our Mighty God plants the seeds of faith and then gives them time to grow before they produce new life.

Where are we this Advent Season? Are in that season of orientation?

Are we in that season of disorientation and loss?

Or are we pregnant with new life, being reorientated to something new that God is doing in and through us?

Wherever we find ourselves this Christmas may we remember how God has mightily moved in the past. May we trust that God is working now in ways that we cannot fully comprehend. And may believe that "He who started a good work in us will complete it in his time and his way."<sup>4</sup> Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPres, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:6