



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**In the Strength of the Lord**  
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*And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace (Micah 5:4-5).*

A young woman is minding her own business, going about her life, doing ordinary things, when all of a sudden, one day, literally out of the blue, she gets a call to become part of something that's truly extraordinary.

This is not, for example, like winning the lottery. Lotteries are schemes where people give up a little in hopes of winning a lot – hence the name. My high school math teacher used to say that a lottery is a tax on the mathematically challenged. He meant that the odds are always against the people who play, because the whole point of a lottery is to make money for whoever sponsors it, and the payout will always be less than what's taken in.

It's worth mentioning this at Christmas time, because part of human nature is the desire to receive a lot in exchange for giving a little. That's why, while the church celebrates Advent, stores have sales in the run-up to Christmas. They know people love the idea of getting more for less, and they'll spend a great deal of money to enjoy the satisfaction of what merchants call "bargains" or "savings." In financial circles, the notion of getting back as much as you can for what you put in is called "return on investment," and the idea, of course, is to maximize return at an acceptable level of risk. It's what drives the whole world of commerce.

Even in some church circles, the Christian faith is so permeated by commercial values that the gospel itself is offered up as a kind of return on investment. Just believe in Jesus, they say, and you'll get into heaven – a huge return in exchange for

what, to many people, is really a very modest investment. Some stewardship sermons in middle- and upper-class churches make the appeal quite explicitly: “Give to God and you’ll be richly rewarded.” The Prosperity Gospel, so popular in America, can fill a sanctuary in New York or a stadium in Houston by promising that you don’t even have to wait for heaven. God will bless you materially right here and now, just for showing up in church, and giving a little more, and claiming to be a Christian.

The church is made up of people who start out, at least, driven by all the same motives that drive people everywhere. We should not be so surprised, then, when men and women in churches don’t always do what’s right, and sometimes do things that are heartbreakingly wrong. It’s the contrast between the life we lift up in Christ and the way people actually live that shocks us in church; but if the awful deeds that come from fallen human nature still surprise us in general, it’s probably because we haven’t been paying attention. The church is, among other things, a hospital for sin-sick souls, and much of what we’re about is seeking a kind of heart transplant, where the Holy Spirit creates in us a clean heart, as the penitent King David prayed, and puts a new and right spirit within us.

But in the beginning, the act that brought the church into being was not corrupted by mixed motives at all. It began when a young woman was asked to do something beautiful for God, and she said Yes, with no promise of any reward, except the spiritual blessings that always come with faithfulness and love.

I don’t know how well angels understand human nature. They always seem to be surprised by the way we’re surprised whenever they show up. We read a few weeks ago how the angel Gabriel told Zechariah the priest that his aging wife will have a son, and they should call him John, and he will grow up to prepare the way for one who is infinitely greater to come. You might think that a priest, who works full-time for God, would be quick to recognize when God is on the move, but Zechariah is skeptical,

confusing the ways of the world with the possibilities of God. Zechariah doubts the angel's promise, so by way of underscoring the claim, and perhaps in a bit of angelic pique, Gabriel strikes Zechariah mute, and the priest has not said another word for the last six months.

But now this same angel comes to Mary, a young woman with no particular religious credentials, and he says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Notice two things about Gabriel's greeting. First, Mary is "favored," which is to say that God is conveying a favor upon her, granting her a great gift, not rendering a reward she already deserves.

The second thing about the angel's greeting is that the *Lord* is with Mary – not the *Force*, as though some inanimate power of nature could be either with or against anyone. No, it is the Lord who is with Mary, the Person behind all of nature, the one who created the world in the first place and still moves in and through it to accomplish the world's redemption. This is God, the divine Person who loves – who loves the world so much, in fact, that he gives his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

That's what God is up to now, and insofar as God's redemption often works through human beings, God's messenger comes to offer Mary the inexpressible gift of being an instrument of God's redeeming grace. The Son of God will become like us, so that we might become more like him, but God wants a woman to bring the Messiah into the world.

So Gabriel brings this invitation to Mary, and Mary says Yes. She's puzzled at first, and for good reason. Mary knows where babies come from, and she knows she's done nothing to make herself a mother. "How can this be?" she asks, but her question comes more from perplexity than from Zechariah's doubt. What she doesn't ask out loud, but must surely be thinking, is "What will people say? What will Joseph say?"

Gabriel gives Mary a little briefing, just enough to convince her that all of this really does come from God. “Nothing will be impossible with God,” the angel says, and Mary is willing to believe it. All right then. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord,” Mary says. “Let it be with me according to your word.” Gabriel hears what he needs to hear, and then God’s messenger departs, leaving Mary to wonder what lies ahead.

“Mary, did you know ...?” The lovely contemporary song asks that question, but it asks only about the positive things, the great blessings to come from this little baby Jesus. But Mary will see other things as well. Besides the normal challenges of bringing up a child, Mary will face the initial heartbreak of betrayal in the eyes of her betrothed, as Joseph comes to the obvious, commonsense conclusion when he learns that his fiancée is pregnant. A lifetime of small-town gossip will follow, while her son turns out to be not quite like all the other boys. When he’s older, people will call him crazy because he acts as though he shares some of the powers and prerogatives of Almighty God. And Mary will see her son arrested, and tried, and convicted of capital crimes. She’ll keep watch along the Via Dolarosa, and at the foot of the cross on Golgotha.

We know how the story turns out, but Mary doesn’t – not when she says Yes to the angel Gabriel. All Mary knows is that God has called her, and because she is a servant of the Lord, she will go wherever he leads and do whatever he wants. “Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.”

How does anyone do that? How do the servants of God find the strength to do what God asks, when the deal on offer is not some attractive return on investment, or the promise that if you give just a little, you’ll get back a whole lot more?

The answer the Bible gives, not only in the words of the prophets but in the lives and examples of the saints, is that the servants of God stand in the strength of the Lord.

Often, people try to distinguish what they think they do on their own merits and strength from the things for which they need God's help. But that's a distinction without a difference, because of course no one ever does any good thing in this world without the gifts and the strength that come from God.

People like to think they deserve the good things they have. It feeds their self-esteem, and their sense of entitlement to keep what they have, and their feelings of virtue whenever they give a little bit of it away. But the truth is that we are all creatures of God, and we have nothing – not even the ability to achieve or acquire anything in this world, and not even life itself – that does not come as a gift on loan from God, and ultimately to be returned to God.

The servants of God know this is true, and they live in a kind of humility that comes from seeing things clearly, the way they really are. They know who God is, and who we human beings are, in our total dependence on the grace and goodness of God.

The servants of God know that whatever they are called to do, God will give them the strength to do it. It's never a question of doing things on their own and seeking God only if they think they can't handle it themselves. God's servants, like Mary, know that some of what God gives will be pure light and deep joy, and some of what God asks them to face will feel like the dark night of the soul, full of struggle and hardship and the temptation to despair.

But God's servants know that they live in the strength of the Lord, because they recognize their limitations and see that only God's strength can sustain them. They can actually feel the prayers of the faithful – not like the encouragement that comes from cheerleaders on the sidelines, but as the Spirit of God lifts them up on those prayers like the palpable wind beneath their wings.



People can do great things in the strength of the Lord. For a chosen few, those things may turn the tide of history and help to set the course of human events. For most of us, the strength we find in the Lord comes to do whatever is in front of us, to be faithful in whatever caring or doing this day requires within the circle of our reach.

But whether the things we're called to do are great or small, if we are faithful we know that we do those things by the grace of God, and in the strength of the Lord.

We believe that our own story will turn out well, because this little baby Jesus turns out to be the Lord and Savior of the world. There will be hardships and struggles in our lives, as there were in the lives of Mary and Jesus. But on the other side of Good Friday there is Easter, and in the meantime, we find in God all the strength we need. Not only the strength, but the courage, and the faith, and the hope, and the love, and ultimately the peace, that God alone can give.



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