

Isn't it amazing all of the things that we think we have to do between now and Christmas. The list can include things like decorating, shopping, wrapping presents, sending Christmas cards, making travel plans, party preparations. The list goes on and on. This is such a busy time of the year. Sometimes I think we try to do too much during this busy season and give ourselves permission to say "No!" to some of the request that come our way.

It may have been a busy time for a young woman named Mary. She was engaged to Joe and making plans for her wedding. He was busy literally building their house. Since he was a carpenter, he wanted to build it right. She was busy with plans for the wedding day as well as trying to get everything ready for the new house, their first home.

It was in the midst of all of this that Mary got an unexpected visitor. His name was Gabriel. Gabe was an angel, a messenger of the Lord God who said to her, ***"Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus."*** (Luke 1:30-31) Talk about being blindsided. Mary had no idea this was coming. It was an announcement that totally changed her life, her plans.

So was Gabrielle's announcement to Mary "good news" for her? If she said "Yes," her life was in danger. Unmarried women are not supposed to get pregnant. Mary knew that she might be stoned to death, buried under a pile of rocks, when the pregnancy was discovered. Mary also knew that Joe could say no to the marriage and walk away from her. Since she lived in a small town, Mary also knew that the people of the town would talk behind her back. Her reputation would be ruined. That doesn't sound like "good news" to me.

But Mary was a very special young woman. She not only listened to Gabrielle's message, but also seriously considered it. She knew that things like this didn't just happen. She also knew that she was keeping herself for marriage, that she was a virgin. So she asked Gabrielle a simple but very important question, ***"But how can this happen? I am a virgin."*** (34) Gabrielle answered, ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ... For nothing is impossible with God."*** (35, 37)

That is the key! Nothing is impossible with God. There are a lot of things that we can't do, but there is nothing that God can't do. Goes does for us what we can't do for ourselves. Mary didn't wake up one morning and decide to have a baby all by herself who would be the Savior of the world. She couldn't do that. Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah and was told that God would make it happen.

This is the one thing that sets the Christian faith apart from all of the religions in our world today. All other religions tell us what we have to do to earn a god's favor. The Muslims have to obey the rules and rituals of their faith, pray at set times every day, give a certain percentage of their income to the needy, fast during the appropriate season of the year, make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if at all possible. Hindu's must live a good enough religious life called dharma in the hopes of building up enough good karma so that they may be reincarnated at a higher level until they are finally set free this cycle of repeated birth and death. Buddhist must practice meditation, follow the advice of their sacred writings to reach enlightenment called Nirvana. Mormons must obey the rules of their religious leaders, go on a mission to spread the Mormon faith and live a good enough life to earn temple rights and hopefully become gods and goddesses in their own worlds. But how do you know if you've ever done enough? You don't. Trying to save ourselves doesn't work.

The Christian faith doesn't tell us what we have to do. It tells us what God has done for us. God sent His Son into our world to save us from sin and death. Jesus Christ is both true God and true man. He lived a perfect life and offered the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He rose from the dead to show that His sacrifice was accepted, the price for sin has been paid in full. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. We don't have to do anything to earn God's love and forgiveness. We can't do anything to earn God's love and forgiveness. It is a gift. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9, ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** This is the heart of God's Christmas message.

Mary responded to Gabrielle by saying, ***“I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”*** (38) Mary grew up looking for the Savior. She had heard the words of the Prophets that promised God would come to rescue His people. She took God's word, God promise to heart. Mary knew that she needed a Savior, that she needed God's love and forgiveness. So Mary said yes to God's gift. Gabrielle's message was Good News for Mary, too.

We need to do the same thing, say “Yes!” to God, receive God's gift in very personal way. The Good News of Christmas is not that you've got everything done on your list. It's not that your kids get everything on their list. The Good News of Christmas is that God loves us. We don't need to be afraid of the God who loves us and wants the best for us. Because God loves us, He is with us. The Prophet Isaiah called the promised savior by the name Immanuel, which means God with us. God comes to us and lives with us. Jesus promises that He will always be with us and that nothing will ever be able to separate us from His love. God in Christ saves us from sin and all of its consequences. Our sins are forgiven. Our guilt and shame have been taken away. Death has been defeated. We are alive in Christ!

That calls for a response. Mary praised God when she went to see her cousin Elizabeth and sang, *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."* (46-47) Like Mary, we need to do the same. Christmas is God's doing, the sending of His Son to rescue us from sin and to give us a new life in His name. So there is really only one thing that needs to be on your pre-Christmas list, and that is to Praise the Lord! Praise God for the gift of His Son, for his love and forgiveness. Amen.