

Speaker 1:

Thank you for continuing to stand as you're able. Our scripture this morning is taken from the Gospel of Luke, the first chapter, verses 26 through 38. The text is in your bulletin if you care to follow along. 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 Israel or 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. This is the word of God for the people of God.

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb:

Let us pray. Oh Lord, what a magnificent time of the year. As we just saturate ourselves in the glorious music and the prayers of the season, we are reminded of your great love that goes to such links and depths. It's overwhelming God. For that we give you thanks. And now Lord, you've given me the special privilege, opportunity and responsibility of preaching your word to these, my friends and your servants, Lord, a task that I cannot do on my own strength and power.

So Lord, I ask you to speak to me and through me in such a way today that all of us here do receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. Many years ago there was a story that appeared in the Reader's Digest about a large moose that got loose in a residential neighborhood and Calgary, Canada. Just wandering around and it found itself in a front lawn somewhere. Well a fish and wildlife officer was called out to try to coax the animal back into the wild, but to no avail. So the only thing the officer could do was shoot the large animal with a tranquilizer dart. So that's what it did.

And as soon as that dart hit that large moose, it darted down the road and collapsed on another lawn. Well, a reporter got ahold of this story and interviewed the lady of the house where the moose collapsed. And he said, "What do you think about this moose collapsing on your lawn?" And she said, "Well, I'm a bit surprised but not as surprised as my husband will be. You see, he's out moose hunting."

The man went out looking for large moose and a large moose came to him. Believe it or not, that's the message of Christmas. While humankind desperately searches for God, for the divine. God comes to us. He doesn't show up with a letter, with a text, with a card. He doesn't send an angel. No. God shows up for himself. And why? Because God is crazy about you. God is crazy about us. God is relentlessly in love with the world. Now this is revealed in one of the greatest Christmas carols ever written. Now, what do you think the greatest Christmas carol ever written is? Joy to the world, maybe. Silent Night, White Christmas, Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer, Grandma Got Run Over by a reindeer?

No, to me, the greatest Christmas carol ever written was written by a poor teenage Jewish girl by the name of Mary 2000 years ago. We just heard about Mary, and after she accepted that amazing call from

God to birth the son of God, she sang the most beautiful song to the Lord later in the text, called the Magnificat. In the Magnificat, all Mary can do is praise God for all that God has done.

And there's a particular verse in the Magnificat I want to lift up. Mary says, "For he has looked with favor on the loneliness of his servant." Other translations say, "He has been mindful." But my favorite translation, the translation which I think captures the emotion of Mary is this. "He has taken notice of me. God Almighty has taken notice of me, me, a poor teenage girl, peasant. God has taken notice of me and has called me to this amazing thing."

Now folks, I have to say, if there is one consistent theme throughout scripture over and over again, it is this, that God loves us and takes notice of us. But I tell you it's amazing to me how difficult it is to convince people of this truth. I'll tell you, as a pastor, two of the most difficult things that I confront and see in people are this, guilt and self-hatred.

Now, sometimes I'll come across pastors who like to bash people over their head about sin every single week. Now don't get me wrong, we need to preach about sin, but they do it every single week and they say to me, "You need to preach on sin more." You know what I say to them? I say, "Most people's problem is not, they're not aware of their sin and their limitations and their problems. The problem is they're too aware of them, so aware of them, they can't see through all of that how loved they are, how accepted they are, how cared for they are."

I tell you as a preacher, as I get out in the community, it's amazing how many terrible preconceived ideas about God I hear about. I especially hear them on the golf course. Now, I love to play golf, as many of you know. And you need to know this, it's also a great opportunity to evangelize. Now, when I started out, I used to wait till the 18th hole to tell people I was a preacher because sometimes when you tell people that on the first hole, they just act totally different. Oh no, for four hours we're stuck with this guy.

But now I've changed my mind. I tell them on the first hole, on the first tee, you know why? Because once they find out they're really nice to me and they give me four foot putts the whole day, "Oh, that's good, that's good. Just say a good word to the man upstairs for me." They think it's an indulgence or something. That's fine for four hours on the golf course with me.

But you hear these things, I invite them to church and they say, "No, I could never do that. Lightning would strike." And so many people see God as this angry judge. They're trying to get away from. The other day I was playing with a guy before he teed off on the first tee he said, "Charlie, I haven't been wondering something, does God [inaudible 00:08:48] on the curve." I said, "Oh yeah, a big curve. It's called grace." And later in the round he looked at me and said, "Charlie, I think I'm going to need a letter of recommendation from you at the Pearly Gates." I said, "No, it's not needed. I already know how God feels about you."

He looked at me and said, "Well, how does God feel about me?" And I said, "He's crazy about you." And he walked away thinking about that. What does John three 16 say? Well, I'll tell you what it doesn't say. It doesn't say for God so loved the perfect people, it doesn't say for God so loved the beautiful people. Thank God. It doesn't say for God's so loved the Democrats or the Republicans. It says what? For God's so loved the world. God takes notice of you and cares about you.

I mean, what do we think this is all about? What do we think advent is all about? Love came down at Christmas to show us how much God loves us, that God wants to bring joy to our lives and peace to our lives and wholeness to our lives. What do we think it's about? And so often people just don't get it. Some of my favorite words from Jesus are this, "Come to me and I will give you rest." And I love those words. You know why? Because they say the exact opposite of what most people think Jesus is going to

say to them. Because a lot of people think Jesus is going to say, "Come to me and I'll give you more judgment."

"Come to me and I'll talk to you more about your sin." "Come to me and I'll make you think all day long about your issues and weigh you down." But it doesn't say that. What does it say? "Come to me and I will give you rest. Come to me and I will bring you joy. Come to me and I'll bring you peace." You see folks, the Christian faith is not some philosophy somebody thought up. And it's not so much a philosophy as it is revelation, God revealing to us his purpose, God revealing to us his love for us, God revealing to us that he so much wants us to have joy.

And if you still have difficulty this morning receiving that and accepting that, let me tell you a story about a famous celebrity. Some of you may remember a real big celebrity by the name of Humphrey the humpback whale. Anyone? Well, this Humphrey, the humpback whale, true story, went up the San Francisco Bay and found itself in the Sacramento River, which is fresh water. And as we all know, freshwater can be deadly to whales. Well, the news coverage, the local news got on the scene, and every night they posted a story about it and then the national news got ahold of it. And every night this whole nation tuned in to see Humphrey's plight.

Well, all kinds of experts got in on this, trying to turn Humphrey around back to the ocean and nothing worked. And of course, everybody got nervous because as the weeks passed, Humphrey, his skin became gray. He became more listless, and many people thought he was going to die, until there was a scientist by the name of Peter Krause who thought of something no one had thought of before. He said, "Why don't we put speakers down into the water so Humphrey can hear other whales feeding and playing?"

And so that's what they did. They put speakers down in the water, began to play recordings of whales feeding and playing. And all of a sudden when they did it, Humphrey, he jumped out of the water and startled the crew. The captain, immediately got to the front of the boat and drove the boat forward towards the San Francisco Bay as Humphrey went along. And as Humphrey got closer to the San Francisco Bay, there were helicopters all over the sky and there were people lined up, thousands of people lined up on the banks to cheer for Humphrey's freedom. Now imagine that. None of their expert strategies worked.

The only thing that worked was the sound of other whales. I guess it takes a whale to talk to other whales. Now imagine God's dilemma. God so wanted the world to know how much he loves this world. And first he tried to show it through the law, that didn't work. Then he tried to show it through the prophets, that didn't work. Then he tried to throw it through scriptures, that didn't work. And then he tried to show it through the people of Israel worshiping in the temple, and that didn't work. And God thought, what in the world am I going to do?

And then God decided to come down himself to speak our language, to rescue us and to bring us home. Colossians says that Christ is the image of the invisible God. Now folks, we may disagree on theology, we may disagree on dogma, we may disagree on politics. We may disagree on the particular stance different people take. But I tell you the one thing we can all come together on is this, that God's grace and love can be experienced in Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter which church you belong to, it doesn't matter which denomination you belong to.

What matters is experiencing God's love in Jesus Christ. Because I'll tell you this, it's the only thing that's going to bring you joy. It's the only thing that's going to make you whole. It's the only thing that's going to put you back together. Oh, I know some of you parents out there are dreading on Christmas Eve to find that box that has these three scary words on it, "Some assembly required." Well, Don Shelby tells

the true story about a father who bought a tree house for his children for Christmas, and the time came for him to put it together. And so he put all the parts on the floor and began reading the instructions.

And much to his dismay and anger, he discovered these were not instructions for a tree house. Rather, they were instructions for a sailboat. And so the next morning he wrote an angry letter to the company talking about the mix up. This is the response he got. "We are truly sorry for the error and the inconvenience. However, it might help to consider the possibility that somewhere there's a man out on a lake trying to sail your tree house."

Now the point is clear, to put something together, you need the right parts and you need the right instructions. And that's where faith in Jesus Christ comes in. Your life will not truly work without it. If you want to truly assemble your life in the right way, the way it was meant for, root in Jesus Christ, tie yourself to Jesus Christ, ground yourself in Jesus Christ. It's like what Max Lucado said about fish. "Take a fish and put them on the beach, and what happens? His gills begin to gasp, scales become dry.

And how do you make that fish happy? Do you do it by pouring a mountain of cash on it? Do you do it by getting a beach chair and sunglasses for it? Do you do it by giving it a magazine and a martini? No. What do you do to make him happy? You put the fish back into his element, because a fish wasn't meant to live on the beach. A fish was meant to live in the water. The same is true of us folks, as sure as I stand here, one of the reasons you're here today is to know this and know this good. The only way you're going to have joy is to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ. We were made to be with the one who created us.

Just like a fish was made for water, we were made to be in relationship, in connection with Jesus Christ. There is a God-shaped void in all of us that only God can fill. And deep inside we know that. We know that money can't do it. We know that cars can't do it. We know that success will never do it. We know that fame will never do it. Popularity will never do it. Parties will never do it. Only faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, let me say a word to some of your parents out there today. I know some of you are thinking about some wonderful gifts to give your children this year. Nice clothes, maybe a car. Some parents are like, "No way, Charlie. I ain't giving him a car." Maybe a nice trip somewhere. Let me tell you, with all the conviction in my heart, this, the greatest gift you can give your children is faith in Jesus Christ. That's why I applaud so many parents in this church who show up faithfully with their kids, modeling the greatest gift in the world, the gift that keeps on giving, faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When nothing else works in this world, faith in Christ will.

So I applaud you parents who come faithfully and give that gift to your children. And I'll tell you this, don't let anything become a bigger priority. Don't let sports become a bigger priority. Don't let other commitments become a bigger priority. Let faith in Jesus Christ and the church stay a priority. It's the greatest gift, the greatest power this world has ever seen.

So have you lost your joy? Are you anxious? Are you tired of comparing yourself to all the people on Facebook who post all their perfect pictures, and they want you to think that's their life all the time? It ain't, let me tell you, they don't post the bad ones. Imagine having a Facebook page where all somebody did was post all the terrible pictures. This is me getting terrible news. This is me when my boyfriend broke up with me. Ooh. This is me getting angry with my spouse. Somebody ought to do that. Not me though.

Are you tired of all the empty promises in this world? Everything is so empty. Embrace God's embrace of you in Jesus Christ. Tony Evans is a great preacher, you may have heard of him? And he tells of the time he was in New York City back in 2003 when there was a blackout, all the power went out of New York City. Can you imagine? Wall Street, the United Nations, the airport, all transportation, rail transportation was just out of power except for one place. A restaurant that Tony found.

They had this long line of people lined up to get hot food. And in the midst of all the darkness, it was the only place that was filled with laughter. It was the only place that was filled with light. It was the only place filled with excitement. And so Tony couldn't believe it. So he found the assistant manager and he said, "Tell me, what is going on?" He said, "You see my hotel over there? It's completely dark, and the airport over there, it's completely dark. Why are you all lit up like a Christmas tree?" And the manager said, "Oh, that's easy. You see, when we first built this place, we built it with a gas generator inside so that no matter what was happening on the outside, we could have light and warmth on the inside." There may be nothing going on out there. There's a lot going on in here.

When you accept Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, he comes to live on the inside of you and gives you such grace and gives you such love and gives you such joy that no matter how dark it gets on the outside, no matter how painful it gets on the outside, he's always there to give you light and love and power no matter what. You want joy? Embrace God's embrace of you in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Eternal God. We just stand amazed at your relentless love that will stop at nothing to embrace us, to love us, to give us the joy we are so desperate for. Oh Lord, teach us to let go of all the trivial things that just do not cut it, and to fully embrace you, the king of kings and the Lord of Lords. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.