

Pastor Charley:

Well, hello. Pastor Charley Reeb here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church wanting to welcome you to remote worship. We're so glad that you've joined us on this first Sunday of Advent. And as you can see, the sanctuary is beautiful. I'm not sure how much you can see in the camera, but I imagine you can see some. The poinsettias are here. The Christmas tree is up. Looks beautiful. It's a welcome sight. And many of you may know this is the first Sunday of the church year, so happy New Year to us as Christians as we begin a new year in Jesus Christ. Again, want to welcome you. Thank you for joining us. Before I go into my prayer, I want to say thank you to those of you who have pledged for our 2021 ministry budget. We appreciate it a great deal. We can't do it without your help. If you haven't pledged yet, we appreciate you doing that as soon as possible as we make plans to put together the budget for next year and get excited about what Christ is going to do through us. So thank you.

Let's be in attitude of prayer together. Lord, we thank you for the gift of today as we begin a new year in the church, this first Sunday of Advent as we anticipate you coming anew in our hearts and in our church and in our lives. Oh Lord, we beg for it. We hope for it. We anticipate it strongly, especially this year. Lord, you gave me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these, my friends and your servants, a task that I need your strength in order to do. So Lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Well, today I want to share with you how to get blessed by God. I imagine that's something you really want. You want to be blessed by God. Well, this morning I'm going to show you how to get it done. Now, when I say blessed, I'm not talking about the name it and claim it prosperity gospel where you ask God for \$1 million and it just shows up on your doorstep the next day. That's not what I'm talking about. When I say blessed, I mean God showing up in your life in a way that transforms you. I'm talking about God showing up in your life in a way that brings you hope and joy and love and peace. I'm talking about a blessed that means God filling a hole in your life.

Now, I know that many of us feel cursed instead of blessed, especially this year, especially 2020. It feels like a cursed year, doesn't it, to say the least. Many of us are beaten and broken and bruised over this whole COVID business and, in addition to that, going through an election. No matter where you stand on that, we just feel tired. And we feel heard, and we feel broken. We feel cursed. And in addition to that, I know many of you have gone through personal tragedy and setbacks, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, personal stresses and personal pain in life. And I think we approach this Christmas season and we welcome it because as we turn the corner and face the first Sunday of Advent, I don't think there's ever been a time in my life when I've welcomed Christmas and Advent more. And I'm sure you feel the same way. You desire the hope and the peace and the joy that the season promises. You wait for it. You crave for it to pierce your darkness.

Robert Louis Stevenson was a great Scottish writer, and he talked about the time or wrote about the time when he was a little kid and he had this ritual growing up in Edinburgh, Scotland. You see, he grew up during the time of gas lamps, and one of the things he loved to do as a child was to sit in his bedroom, look out the window in the street with all the gas lamps. And he'd watch when it got dark as the lamp lighter would come along and light each lamp. And there would be a little light that the lamp showed and then some darkness and then another light again. And he would often call out to his parents and say, "Mommy, Daddy, come watch the man who's punching holes in the darkness." Well, I imagine that's how many of us feel. We want the Lord to come and bless us and punch holes in our darkness. We crave and we anticipate and we long for God to sooth our anxious spirit and soothe the relentless pain and distress in our life and to calm us and to help us realize the healing power of God and

all the love and the hope and the joy and the peace of the season. Maybe you've been craving for that. Maybe you've been grasping for that and nothing seems to work.

Well, today, I have a message for you that's going to tell you exactly how to be blessed, exactly how to receive that light in the midst of your darkness, that way to receive the hope and the peace and the love and the joy that you crave. And I can verify the message I'm going to preach to you today is true because I've applied it to my own life. When I've been in the midst of darkness and pain and I feel like there's nowhere else to turn and I feel like things are going nowhere, I have applied this truth, and it always makes me experience God's blessing, blessing. It always brings me out of the darkness, and I believe it's going to do that for you today. So get ready. I'm going to share with you a powerful, truthful message on how to get blessed by God through the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now, most of us know the story of Mary and how Gabriel the angel showed up to talk to Mary and share with Mary the news that she would birth the very son of God, that she would be the mother of Jesus. But oftentimes during the Christmas season and as we talk about Mary, we often overlook a key piece to that story. I'm talking about when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, because I believe it's in this encounter, it's in this story that we receive the key to being blessed by God. So let's dive in a little deeper and take a look.

Let's begin with the angel Gabriel and what the angel Gabriel said to Mary about Elizabeth. If you're keeping score, this is Luke chapter 1, beginning with verse 36. "Your relative Elizabeth," Gabriel said, "is also going to have a son, even though she is old." No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months, she will have a son. "Nothing is impossible for God." Now, why does this sound familiar to me? I'll tell you, every time I read this during the Christmas season or whenever I read it, I always think of me and Brandy and our son Paul because we were told for years we can never have children. And then God blessed us with Paul in our mid-forties. I tell you what Gabriel said is true. Nothing is impossible to God.

Then Mary responds to Gabriel and says, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it happen as you have said," and the angel left her. At this point, Mary didn't question anything. She just said, okay, let's make this happen. Let's do this. And Mary's pregnancy was going along just fine, and then Mary's family decided to throw a baby shower for Elizabeth and Mary. Well, actually, the Bible doesn't say that, but it does talk about a sweet, tender, holy encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Can you imagine how holy and sweet that was? Here's Elizabeth, who's very, very old, who's pregnant with John the Baptist, and here's Mary, the mother of Jesus. And they encounter one another. Folks often say that that pregnant women glow. Can you imagine how much Mary and Elizabeth glowed? It's unbelievable. This is what the Bible says about Mary's visit with Elizabeth.

Verse 39, "Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she greeted Elizabeth." And listen, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her." Remember, Elizabeth was carrying John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the Lord. And when that encounter occurred, oh my gosh, when Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, John the Baptist left, as some translation say, moved within her. And I know many of you mothers out there can remember those times when you were pregnant and your baby would kick and move and leap. That would happen to us very often. Paul was a kicker. He was a mover. He was a shaker. Whenever he heard music, he would kick, kick, kick. Whenever we were at a sporting event, like a hockey game, he would punch, punch, punch and kick, kick, kick, kick. It was exciting. And speaking of exciting, this encounter of Mary and Elizabeth was very exciting, the most exciting event ever because, imagine, the two most important mothers in history were meeting one another, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

It was a holy event, folks. In fact, so holy that this is what happened next. "The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. Then in a loud voice, she said to Mary, 'God has blessed you more than any other woman. He has also blessed the child you will have. Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me.'" Elizabeth was so moved by the spirit that she began to preach to Mary. John the Baptist actually sensed Jesus Christ in the very womb and began to preach to Mary. But it's the last thing Elizabeth said to Mary that is very, very profound and I want to underscore today. It's the very last thing she said to Mary that reveals to us why God chose Mary to birth the son of God. Ever wonder that? Ever wonder why God chose Mary among millions and billions of women, why God chose Mary, this teenage, Jewish, peasant girl, why God chose Mary to birth the son of God? You're about to find out.

Take a look at Luke 1:45. Here it is. "The Lord has blessed you," Elizabeth said to Mary, "because you believed that he will keep his promise." Now, pay attention to that. Notice, Elizabeth did not say, "Mary, God chose you because you came from the right family." Elizabeth did not say, "God blessed you because you are beautiful," or, "God blessed you because you are sophisticated," or, "God blessed you because you're intelligent." No, what does Elizabeth say? Elizabeth said, "Mary, God blessed you because you believe that God keeps his promises. You believe the Lord." Now, notice she used the past tense, believed, which means long before Gabriel showed up, Mary was a woman of faith, a young woman of faith. And she may have been young, but she believed God kept his promises. She took God at his word. And so God said to Gabriel, "Gabriel, that's the one. That's a strong woman of faith. I want you to go visit her." Mary was blessed because she believed God. She believed with God, nothing wasn't possible.

So here it is. You want to want to get blessed by God? You want God to punch holes in your darkness. Remember these three words: believing brings blessing. Believing brings blessing. It's that simple, folks. Nothing pleases the heart of God more than when we believe him and when we believe in him. Hebrew says it. "Without faith, it's impossible to please God." When we begin believing in God and letting him work, that's when life begins to open up for us. When we allow God to work through us and we believe him at his word and we take him at his word, that's when life begins. Now, it doesn't mean life becomes perfect, but it does mean this. When you need God, he will show up, and he will provide promises and blessings and power that will bring you hope, that will bring you peace, that will bring you love, that will bring you healing. You see, folks, Mary showed us what belief and faith actually look like.

We in the church talk a lot about faith and belief. We talk a big game. But the question is, do we really know what faith is? Do we really know what belief is? I believe Mary shows us by definition concretely what faith is. Here it is. It means allowing God to work. That's what it means. That's what Mary did. Mary took God at his word and simply said, "I'm going to get out of the way, Lord. You work." In fact, notice what she said at the very end. She said to Gabriel, it's key, verse 38, "Let it happen," she said. "Let it happen as you have said," and the angel left her. You see, Mary got it. God, I'm going to take you out your word. I'm going to get out of the way. Let it happen. Let's go. And Gabriel knew she got it, and so Gabriel left. Folks, let is one of the most powerful words of the Christian faith. Let go and let God. We often hear that. It's very cliché. It's been said so much. It sounds cheesy. We see it on greeting cards. We see it on memes. But you know it is the truth, and I know some of you need to hear this truth today.

All Mary did was believe. All Mary did was believe, and she allowed God to work. She didn't plan it, she didn't create it. All she did was carry the baby and delivered it. That's why she was blessed. She believed, and so often, we miss this. We try to force things to happen. We try to plan everything. We try to control everything. We try to move things and muster things and force things instead of having allowing God to work. Folks, we have to remember we are channels, not the source. We are channels through which God works, but we are not the source. It's not up to us. God is the one who orchestrates. God is

the one who plans. God is the one who moves. God is the one who creates, and God is simply looking to us to be channels through which God wants to move. And Mary shows us that.

So you want to be blessed by God? Just get out of the way. Believe God at his word, and allow the spirit of Lord to flow through you and work through you to let. This is a message that especially those of us in the Western world who are very individualistic and very, very into controlling things and planning things and having all the answers need to hear, and it's a lesson I need continually. I recall having a conversation with a very wise friend of mine, and they said something very profound at one time to me. And so when I saw them again, I was trying to remember what they said, and I couldn't remember. And so I approached this person who I have so much respect for, who I look up to, who has so much wisdom. And I said, "Listen, the last time we were together, you said something very profound to me that I'm trying to remember, but I can't seem to remember it." And of course, they couldn't remember it either. But then this person said something very wise to me. And they said, "Charley, you'll remember what you're supposed to remember, and you'll forget what you're supposed to forget."

Can you imagine living your life and living your faith in that way in all aspects of your life? Many of us are just one moment away, a one moment of surrender away, to being blessed by God, to having that hole being punched in our darkness, for the light to come through. It sounds very simple. It sounds very easy, but for some of us, that's the truth. We are one moment of belief away, of surrender away, to God, for the doors to be opened up. Remember, believing brings blessing, and one of the most important stories in all of scripture teaches us that. Mary teaches us that.

Now I know some of you may be thinking, well, Charley, come on, isn't this just an excuse to be lazy, just believe God and get out of the way? Well, let me tell you this. The only thing worse than laziness is futility, working and wasting energy and being preoccupied with something that takes you nowhere, that has no meaning, that has no purpose. And I often see that more than I see laziness. We have to think about it. When God really wants to move and he wants you to act in your life, I've learned that God will get your attention. And you will have all the motivation and all the sense of urgency you need. But so often, we don't wait on God to provide that. We try to get way ahead of God and say, "God, I'm going to do this. Bless it. It's got to be what you want." And God says, "Would you hold up? I have the big picture in mind. Just believe me and trust me, and I will move."

I tell you, I can understand this and believe this in my life. Everything significant, everything pivotal, everything imported, everything that's been critical in my life and profound in my life has happened, not because I forced it to happen, but because I let it happen. It was something that came out of nowhere. It was something that I didn't orchestrate. It was something that I said as I look back, "Lord, it this had to be you because this is something that I didn't plan." I could have never planned this. I could have never done this. And you think about your life. Think about the true, wonderful things that have happened to you. Think of all the great blessings that you've experienced. I guarantee you most, if not all, of them were surprises that you didn't expect, that came out of nowhere simply because you let it happen, simply because you believed. And even if you are expecting something like it, you didn't anticipate the timing. Are you allowing God to work? Are you getting out of God's way? Are you simply believing God? It sounds simplistic, but how often have we preached it? Have faith. Believe in the Lord. Believe that what the Lord says is true. Believe you can take God at his word. Why do we worship, and why do I preach? And why do we read scripture? And why is faith a priority? It is that. It is faith. Believing brings blessing.

So how does this work, right? Where does the rubber meet the road in our lives? I know some of you're thinking that. Well, Charley, this sounds great. This sounds good up here in the abstract, but tomorrow when I have to go to work or when I have to deal with virtual school and deal with my family and deal with my kids and deal with bills and deal with real life, how do I get into a place where I experience this

blessing? How do I get to a place where I'm receptive to what you're talking about today? Well, believe it or not, the answer comes from the greatest Christmas carol ever written. Now, think about that for a moment. What do you think is the greatest Christmas carol that was ever written? Silent Night? Joy to the World? Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? Those are very beautiful songs and fun songs, but no.

You want to know the greatest Christmas carol that was ever written in all of history? It was written and performed 2,000 years ago by Mary, the mother of Jesus. It's called the Magnificat, and it's right there in Luke. Mary was so inspired by Elizabeth's words and by that encounter that she began to sing these words. It's found in Luke chapter 1, beginning with verse 46. "With all my heart," she says, "I praise the Lord. And I'm glad because of God, my Savior. He cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God all powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him." So basically, in the Magnificat, Mary is just praising God. All she can do is talk about how great God is and all the great thing God has done in her life.

So this shows us the key. You want to get into a place where you are receptive to God's blessing, you are receptive to God working through you, you are receptive to that belief that is so strong? Here it is. Stay in touch with God through worship, through prayer, through scripture reading. What was Mary doing? Mary was simply worshipping. When was the last time you just worshiped and worshiped Almighty God? You see, that's why worship is so important. As a preacher, I'm always talking about how important it is for regular worship, whether it's remotely or in-person, even before COVID, to attend worship regularly. I'm not just trying to waste my breath. It's a practice that helps us learn how to be present with the Lord because the more we're present with the presence of Almighty God, the more we can understand how to move with God in our daily life and allow God to work.

Let me put it another way that may help you. For millions and millions of people, for scores of people, the Serenity Prayer has been a lifesaver. The Serenity Prayer used by those in AA and those in NA and various groups and individuals has truly been transforming. It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian, and it was based on the Lord's Prayer. And what's interesting is as many think what I'm about to read to you is the Serenity Prayer, that it's a short prayer that says this: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change and the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." Well, that's very profound, but that's just the beginning of the prayer. Many people don't know there is much more after that. So listen, "Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to your will so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen."

Folks, that's where the power is. That's where the blessing is, and it's a nuance that we're not always open to. But it's the truth, the nuance of simply taking God at his word and saying, "I surrender to it. You work. I'll get out of the way, and I know you'll move through me when you need me. Oh, Lord, bless me." Believing brings blessing, and this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Let's pray.

Lord, as we experienced the witness of Mary, this young teenage girl, most scholars believe, who simply took you at your word and believed you, that's all she did, Lord, give to us the courage and the faith to simply take you at your word, in the midst of trying times, in the midst of such chaos, to simply stand firm on what you have told us through your scriptures and the promises that you've given to us. And we will receive the blessing we so desperately crave. We believe you, Lord. Today, we take you at your word, and we stand on it. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Receive this benediction. Now may that mind that was in Christ Jesus being you also. May the love of God, our Heavenly Father, abide with you this day and through this week. May the guidance and power

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of the Holy Spirit fall fresh upon you and the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ go with you and sustain you both now and forevermore. Amen.