

Advent 4, 2008  
Good Hope Lutheran Church  
Luke 1: 31 – 32

From the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 1, part of the Christmas story so familiar to us by now. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, You will conceive and bear a Son, and you will name Him Jesus. And He, will be great.

We thank you Heavenly Father for the gift of the Christ Child, and we thank you for our children now. Take us and our youngsters too, and shape us all according to your word and will. Make us the people you want us to be, make us more like Jesus! And fit us on earth, for a place one day in heaven. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.

Oh, little Mary, how hard it must have been to understand. I mean after all, from before the beginning God had been preparing for this moment; from before the beginning God had been thinking and planning and thinking some more, God knew what the angel Gabriel was going to say. God understood what it meant, but Mary? How could she possibly understand, she was just a kid and anyway she talked to Gabriel for what, maybe five minutes? How could it make sense to her at all? I mean here we are, 2000 years down the road, we each of us have heard the Gospel story our whole entire life, and yet we struggle to understand—the Son of God, the virgin birth; the life the death the resurrection, after all these years we still struggle to understand. What must little Mary have been thinking.

And of all the lines in Gabriel's speech, guaranteed to confuse a human being and especially a human parent, it's this one that gets me—"Your child will be great." Your child will be great, I'm betting Mary spent a lifetime trying to decipher that one, my hunch is understanding the virgin birth was a snap compared to understanding what Gabriel meant by this, "He will be great. Your child I mean, He'll be outstanding!"

Now those of you who are parents. Is there anything you want to hear more than this? Is there anything you would rather be told, Hey! Your child is great! At math, at spelling, at shooting free throws, whatever, doesn't matter, that's my boy! That's my girl! "I've always thought that kid was something special, glad you noticed too, it's about time!" Parents, is there anything you'd

rather be told, “Your child is great,” I mean I would gladly be a total failure myself. A wash out, a flop, it’s okay, just to know my kids are great, and that you think so too. And as for Mary, hearing it from an angel no less! Being told by Gabriel, “Your kid is great”—sweet! And how she must have remembered this moment, and held on to it for dear life, every time something came along to disappoint her little boy. If He wasn’t invited to a birthday party, if someone made fun of Him at school. When the crowds rejected Him, when one friend denied Him and another betrayed Him, now hold on, Mary would think. The angel told me He’d be great, and I’m sure He will be. Life kind of hurts for Him right now but that has to stop pretty soon doesn’t it? Doesn’t it?

Only it didn’t. Life hurt for her little boy Jesus, all the way to the end. It hurt all the way to the cross, it never got better that way! Was the angel wrong? Had Gabriel lied? Life for Jesus seemed so disappointing, meaning life for His mother Mary certainly WAS disappointing, parents we understand that. We feel our children’s’ pain, usually more than they do, Mary certainly did. Hey! she cried, throughout His life but especially at His death, What happened here? What happened to how great He was supposed to be?

Well Mary, Jesus was great. All along, He was, the problem is how hard it is for humans, to understand true greatness. Mary heard what Gabriel said, it just took a lifetime to understand, see true greatness is not measured by the number of toys you have, or the number of Little League trophies. It’s not the number of friends, or newspaper clippings, or consecutive times in the Honor Roll. It’s not even being well-liked, or well-respected, or successful in your chosen career someday, it’s faithfulness. That’s all. Faithfulness. Jesus was great, because Jesus was faithful, He knew God and trusted God and obeyed God, Jesus was great because Jesus was faithful—yes, faithful even to the point of death on a cross! And we are great when we are faithful, our kids are great when they are faithful, greatness is not how you or your kid rates in the world’s view of things. It’s how you and your kid rate, in God’s view of things. And God looks at the heart, and the faith, and the obedience—and God goes by that.

It took Mary a lifetime to understand true greatness. I wonder if we are any, quicker. Do we get

it yet? Do we? What matters in your life anyway? What matters in your family? What do your kids want for Christmas this year and what are you getting them—an obedient kind of faith? Greatness in the eyes of God? Or more of the same, more greatness so called, in the eyes of the world.

Well. At any rate. Life can be disappointing, for all of us, and nothing is harder to take for a parent than when life disappoints our children as well. Just ask Mary mother of our Lord about how that works. But you can also ask Mary what she learned about true greatness, and what it is that truly makes a child special—faith, trust, peace, joy, obedience to God, the love of Christ, the hope of eternity—that's greatness in God's eyes. That's what Mary learned, 30 some years after Gabriel first spoke to her. That's what we learn today, and by the grace of God—that's what we can now offer our children too, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.