



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

This sermon is the third in our Advent series called “Prepare Ye” and it is titled, “Long Dark Hallways”.

“Daddy?” a little child touched his father’s forehead. The dad opened his eyes, fixed on the digital clock by his bed that read 1:45. And that was a.m. “Yeah son.” “I need to go to the bathroom.” “Fine, Pal. Thanks for the update!”

The child was four years old. Builders had just remodeled his home and a bathroom was now down a long hallway. When you’re four years old and wandering around the house at night, a new hallway looks five miles long with multiple side rooms, where giants are waiting to jump out and gobble up little kids for late-night snacks.

“Daddy?” the child asked. “Please come with me?” “Thanks for the invitation son, but for some reason I’m tired. You go ahead.” Shuffle, shuffle, and stop went his slippers on the bedroom floor. Turned around and shuffle, shuffle and stop again. “Daddy?” “Yes, son.” “Please some with me?” “OK”. The father

crawled out of bed and walked with his son. The child had never been this way before.

Neither had Mary.

Luke writes, "In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." Verses 39-40.

You remember. "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary." Verses 26-27. Gabriel announces that the Holy Spirit will come upon the virgin Mary and she will bear a son, Jesus.

Mary knew that she has never been this way before. Her hallway looked five miles long with multiple side rooms, where giants were waiting to jump out and gobble her up for a late-night snack. How is Mary going to explain all of this to her parents? To Joseph? To her friends?

You know that same sinking feeling. So do I. Maybe you are terrified at the thought of getting COVID 19 or watching a spouse suffer with it. As you all know, I was recently quarantined for 14 days which turned into 10 days by the country health nurse. I have to admit that I was very concerned not only for me, but for Rodney's health, should he get it. All that stress in the middle of waiting for word on our sister-in-law's struggle with COVID. And at the end of that long dark hallway, I was fine, no symptoms, but Rodney's brother's wife did die of that nasty virus. We had never been down that hallway before.

Maybe you are faced with a family situation that has your stomach tied up in knots. Maybe you are not sure if now is the right time to quit your job, retire or start your own business. Maybe you are unsettled about a decision your grandchildren have made. We all in one way or another face a future that only God knows because it is so painful, so private. Whatever our long, dark hallway, we know we have never been this way before.

Temptations are at least three-fold. First, we can do nothing. That is what Mary could have done. Stay in Nazareth. Close the curtains. Shut the doors. Block all calls. Not seek out anyone's friendship and compassion. When we

are thrust into a difficult situation, it is tempting to isolate ourselves, curl up in a fetal position and hope to die. In other words, do nothing.

Secondly, we can make excuses. If anyone had a list of valid excuses, it had to be Mary. She could say; I am too young. I am engaged to Joseph. We weren't planning on starting a family so soon! Or the most obvious excuse, I am a virgin.

Recently found on line was this list of excuses: "Billy was late for school today because his little brother replaced the milk in Bill's cereal with Crazy Glue. Billy's mouth stuck together and we needed to melt the glue." Or how about, "A truck full of Vaseline crashed on the highway and cars were sliding all over the place." That one is even better than 12 or 18 inches of snow. Or, "I put my uniform in the microwave to dry it and it caught on fire." "My false teeth flew out of the window while I was driving on the highway."

We all have lists of excuses, some even more creative than "the dog ate my homework". And they are just that, excuses as to why we do not want to follow God's leading down long, dark hallways. "I couldn't find the right tool." "I threw out my back shoveling snow." "I am too busy, too tired and too old."

Third, we can become overwhelmed with fear. We could not blame Mary if she had become paralyzed with fear as she listened to voice like, "Say no to courage and yes to caution. Expect the worst. Triple-lock all doors. Protect yourself in a tight radius of won'ts, don'ts, cant's and quits. Think about every possible peril. Worry yourself sick with "What if?"

We all know these voices. Overwhelmed with fear, we become angry, short-fused and a bear to live with. Yet, when God calls us to "go into ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths are yet untrodden, through perils unknown" He does not call us to go alone. God knows that long dark hallways are not conquered by promising that He will be with us in Spirit. A mystical, abstract vague presence does no one any good. Just ask a four-year old. No. Dark hallways need real presence. And real presence is exactly what God delivers.

Our reading this morning say, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Note the joy! Elizabeth's baby, John the Baptist, leaps in

his mother's womb. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and rejoices. Imagine what this does for Mary? It lifts her spirit. It gives her courage. It puts resolve in her heart and confidence in her future.

There is more. Did you catch what Elizabeth says? She calls Mary, "the mother of my Lord!" Jesus is Lord! Earlier in Luke 1 Gabriel calls Jesus "son of the Most high." The one who will sit on "The throne of his father David". "he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." These are great names for Jesus, but there is no name higher than Lord.

Jesus is not an assistant to God the Father or a junior-partner. Jesus is not the vice-president of the universe. Jesus is a full-fledged member of the godhead, equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in every way. John says, "Through him all things were made" John 1:3 Paul proclaims, "He is the image of the invisible God". Colossians 1:15 And the writer of Hebrews says Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Hebrews 1:3 Jesus is Lord—God in the flesh!

Jesus our Lord, took on flesh and blood so that he could take us into his arms, heal our hurts, forgive our sin and destroy our darkness. Jesus our Lord "came down and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit." He did it to be Emmanuel—God with us through life's dark and difficult journeys.

Jesus never stopped going down. He went so low as to humble himself to death, even death on a cross. The source of truth, he's found guilty of a lie. The source of light; for three hours he hangs in the darkness. The source of life; he's crucified, dead and buried. This is no sentimental or syrupy love, but rather a fierce love for us. Driven by nails. Marked with scars. Crowned with thorns. And risen from the dead to reign and rule our lives with deep compassion and transforming grace.

What did Mary say when Elizabeth called her, "the mother of my Lord?" Luke tells us, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Jesus guides us by his real presence. His Gospel proclaimed; the baptismal deliverance remembered, the body and blood of the Eucharist celebrated. And with joy we await our final journey. The resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come!

Because of Christ's cleansing blood, his resurrection joy and the power of Pentecost, many believers have dared to march straight ahead. Paul tell us

why in 2 Corinthians 14: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.”

Whatever your long, dark hallway looks like, listen—God is calling. God is calling you to “Go”. But God guarantees you will never, ever go it alone. That is why, with the confidence of Mary we take our step with those words, “Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, rejoice.” **AMEN**