

CHRISTMAS FAITH

Week #1 of a 4-Week Advent Series

Dec. 2, 2020

Rev. Richard Rogers

Rev. Richard Rogers: Hello! I'm Richard Rogers, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center. Tonight we're beginning our Advent celebration on the Wednesday Night Service. And the spiritual quality that we're celebrating tonight is faith: faith and hope. And we're going to talk about how Christmas really is a journey of faith and hope. And how many times maybe we've been disappointed in the past. And how important faith and hope is for us to really move into this holiday and experience all the good that we want in our lives.

Alright; a couple of announcements. In fact, I only have one announcement for you. The Youth Ministry – and we have such a fabulous Youth Ministry, and they are being so creative in all the ways that they're reaching out to our families during this time! But our Youth & Family Ministry is providing a special Drive-Through Holiday Celebration for all the kiddoes and their families on December 12th. So I want you to mark your calendar for December 12th. It's going to be a drive-through experience, kind of like what we did at Halloween. And we're going to have lots of activities. And it's going to be Saturday the 12th from 4 to 5:30 p.m. So come and be a part of that. It'll be a great family event!

Alright; let's move into our time of meditation.

MEDITATION:

I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. And I want you to feel the faith it takes to embrace Christmas. I want you to feel how much faith it takes to open your mind and heart and soul to be divinely blessed. When we live hurt or wounded, we never really have the faith to receive all the good that God is. When we live small, little lives, we never really have the faith to open to all the promises that God has made to us.

So in this Christmas season – when we're taught to ask; from the time we were small children, we were taught to ask for what we wanted – I'm going to invite you to open the activity of faith in your life. To live in the full power of faith. To open to all the blessings of Christmas. To open to all the miracles. To allow God to bless you in greater and greater and greater ways. That the magic of Christmas requires faith. You have to be willing to believe! You have to be willing to believe that God wants good – and only good! – for you. And that the power of God is within you. And the glory of God is all around you.

I have faith in God. I have faith in Christmas. I have faith in the infinite goodness of God: right here, right now. So in the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

MESSAGE:

Rev. Richard Rogers: So tonight we have this gorgeous, rich, fabulous Advent wreath. And as we move through each week of our Advent celebration, we're going to acknowledge one or another spiritual quality. Because, as we move into and through this Christmas season, what we know is that Christmas requires a broadening – a deepening – of our spiritual life. That, if we move into Christmas – especially this year, where there's been so many challenges; so many ups and downs. And so, if we move into Christmas from the same mindset that we live most of the time, we really miss the blessing of Christmas.

So tonight we're going to light this candle [*lights first advent candle*] for the spiritual quality of faith. And hope. And all the ways that God asks us to move into hope. Hope for a greater day. Hope for a greater possibility. Hope for a greater life. And the faith that knows that, with God, all things are possible. Okay?

So I want to talk to you tonight. I want to talk to you about being willing to be in this holiday season from a brand new way. From a brand new place. I know that so many things have changed this year. The way we do church has changed. The way we do services has changed. You know, we're doing things through Zoom – the classes. We're doing – I'm doing – speaking to literally a thousand empty chairs. And nobody ever falls asleep, but I don't get too many rounds of applause, either, so it's kind of a ... [*laughs*] It's a gift and a problem! And so, we are learning to many things.

And so what happens sometimes when it doesn't go the way we want it to go – it doesn't go the way we expect it to go – there's all those feelings of sadness or grief or disappointment. And sometimes those things actually get in the way of us experiencing the good that is right here. That's right in front of us.

So if we're willing to allow Christmas to be different, I invite you to be really clear about what your intention is for this holiday. What is it that you do ... What is the most important part? If you can't everything the way you like it – if there's things you have to let go of during this holiday season – what is the most important thing? What's the thing that gives meaning and depth to your holiday celebration? Because that doesn't have to change! If you want to feel loved; if you want to feel connected; if you want to feel the beauty of the season, none of that has to change! The form may change, but the substance never has to change. And that, as a spiritual being, is one of the things I want you to get really clear about in your life: is the form may change, but the substance never changes.

If you want to feel loved, there's a million different ways that you can feel loved. And we might be attached to one form – or one way that we're used to being loved – but, in reality, there's a billion zillion different ways that we can experience love through the holidays. That we can experience beauty. Or we can experience connection. There's so many different ways! And what we want to do this year is just open to what's the most important thing, and be willing for the form to change and evolve so that we don't get stuck in one way of thinking. One way of being. One way of learning. That we are open to all the ways that God has for us.

And that's one of the reasons I don't think we should ever have a bulletin. This is an aside. That's one of the reasons I don't think we should ever have a bulletin in church. Because when you come into church and you get a bulletin, you say, "*This is going to go here, and this is going to happen, and this is going to happen.*" Like, where in your life does God give you a program for the day and say, "*It's going to happen this way.*" But when you come to church, we're so used to being in control – we're so used to knowing what's going to happen next – that we actually miss the spiritual significance: that we never know! We pay our quarter; we take our chances. We're in for the ride!

And this holiday season what I want you to hold on to is the most important thing: those things that are the most important to you. But let go of the form! So we're going to talk about that.

Alright. Barbara Corcoran, who you may have seen on *Shark Tank*. She has a large real estate company in New York City. She said this. She said, "*Finding opportunity is a matter of believing it's there.*" So you want love this year? You have to believe that love is there, even though the form may have changed. You want joy, peace, abundance? You have to believe that it's there, or you won't even begin to look for it.

So I want to go into Scripture. And [*laughs*] I want to go into the Scripture where the angel Gabriel comes to Mary. Because I think is such a meaty, rich, powerful way of looking at the holidays: looking at our spiritual life in the context of faith.

Alright; so here we go. Luke 1: 26 through 32. *“In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.”*

Okay? So here’s the stage. Young woman engaged to Joseph. Good Jewish family. She’s engaged. And the angel Gabriel is sent by God to give her a message. Right? So ...

So the angel Gabriel ... Now, the way it is in my mind – it may not be this way in your mind! But the way it is in my mind: this is the angel Gabriel. The angel Gabriel we’re told is an archangel. So I want you to imagine a huge, nine-foot, winged angel showing up in Mary’s life. Showing up maybe in our life. Showing up. Right? And here’s how the story goes:

“And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one; the Lord is with you.’” So imagine you’re just doing whatever you’re doing – doing the dishes, doing laundry, maybe driving to work, whatever – and you look over, and there’s this nine-foot, winged angel tapping you on the shoulder and saying, *“O, favored one! Blessed is he!”* You know! *“Greeting, o favored one; the Lord is with you.”*

Now, I don’t know what your reaction would be to that. *[Laughs]* But I know that I would have a reaction to that! I would be a little put off! But in Scripture, in Verse 29, it says this: *“But she was much perplexed.”* *[Laughs]* *“She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting was this.”* *[Laughs]*

And this is one of my favorite lines in the whole Christmas story, right? Because a nine-foot angel just tapped on her shoulder, and what Scripture says was, *“She was much perplexed, and pondered what sort of greeting might this be.”*

Like, how many times *[laughs]* – how many ways – has the archangel Gabriel greeted any of us? Right? So this wasn’t like she had a file of angel greetings, and this was outside of it. This was a situation that is so big – so amazing – and the Scripture so downplays it. Right? *“She was perplexed, and wondered what kind of greeting was this.”*

Because I want you to see that, for most of us, if we’re driving to work and we look over, and in our passenger seat is a nine- ... a crammed-in nine-foot angel tapping us on the shoulder and saying, *“I’d like to have a conversation”* ... At that moment, we’d be driving our car through the next lot. I mean, we’d be running into people. If I was doing laundry, and in the laundry room there’s this nine-foot angel, I would lose my stuff! I would ... It would freak me out!!! Can I say that in church? It would freak me out. It would!

And so the whole Christmas story is based on this huge freak-out that starts the whole Christmas story. So, we want to go into Christmas in this quiet, sedate, being perplexed and pondering, right? But really, the reality is *[laughs]* if we really allow ourselves to go into the metaphor of the Christmas story – if we allow ourselves to really allow this Scripture to come to life in our life – I want you to think about how you would deal with a nine-foot archangel, full glory: lights shining, halo maybe, white gauzy outfit, maybe some guns on the angel Gabriel. Right? Right? A full-on archangel machine – right? – taps you on the shoulder. Imagine “The Rock” as an angel. That’s how I see Gabriel! Imagine “The Rock” – maybe plus or minus tattoos – but imagine “The Rock” as the archangel Gabriel. Right? Big, strong spiritual presence taps you on the shoulder. You’re going to have a reaction!

Then the angel goes on. *“The angel said, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary.’”* Right? So then the next line he kind of gives us the gist of what happened, right? Scripture says she was perplexed; I think she’d be having a cow! Right? I think she would just literally be losing her stuff! Right?

“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 he will be named Jesus. He will be great; he will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord will give him the throne of his ancestor, David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.’”

So he makes this huge promise to her! Right? That you’re going to conceive this child, and he’s going to be “all that.” He’s going to be the Messiah. He’s going to be foretold in Scripture. He’s going to sit on the throne of David. And here you are: a young maiden. A young woman in some hick little town.

Now, I want you to imagine. Whatever you imagine your hick-ish little town is that you’ve driven through or seen, imagine Galilee, Nazareth was that hick town. So you’re a young girl from a hick town, and a nine-foot “Rock” knocks on your shoulder and says, *“Proclaim! Guess what? You’re going to have God’s baby.”* Like, this whole thing is wild!!! [Laughs] It’s crazy! Like, we read this year after year and we go, *“Ho hum, yeah, yeah. God’s baby. Got it. Virgin. Got it.”* Right? This is crazy stuff! If we don’t think this stuff is crazy stuff, we sound nuts! Right? This is crazy stuff! We believe stuff that is nuts, right?

And, yet, we have to open our mind to really take in the spiritual message. What is the spiritual message here?

So the angel says, *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”* And then Mary says to the angel, *“How can this be? For I’m a virgin.”* So this story only gets wilder, right? So now she’s going to give birth to the Messiah, and she’s a virgin, right?

So, I want you just to hold how crazy this is. And what I want you to see is that there is a spiritual message in this story for all of us!

And the angel says 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, and he will be called the Son of God. And now your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age, has conceived a son. And she is in the sixth month. And for her, it was said that she was barren. For with God, nothing is impossible.”* And then Mary said, *“Here I am, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* And then the Angel departed.

Like, I’ve got to really break this one down. Right? Because if we just listen to this story year after year after year, and we don’t really kind of break it down, and really begin to apply it to our life, it just sounds weird. Like, *“Yeah, right.”* Right? But when we break it down from a spiritual point of view, we can say, *“Yes! I believe that! I believe that that spiritual process is happening.”*

Because what I want you to see is this young woman from her place of innocence. That’s what her virginity represents, right? This place of innocence. The Word of God is spoken directly to her soul and, instead of dismissing it, she says, *“Yes!”* She’s given a vision – a possibility – that is so big; it seems crazy, it’s so big! And I believe that, from time to time, all of us are given this vision by God that seems so big, so crazy, so out-of-this-world, that there’s just no place for us. Where do we hold that? Where do we put that? How do we understand that?

And that’s what faith does! This is a story that when the Spirit of God speaks to us – gives us an idea; gives us a possibility; reveals something so big, so great – that the faith in us says, *“Yes! Let it be done unto me! Let it be done, for I am the servant of God!”*

See, this is where it gets powerful! Because I absolutely believe that the Spirit of God is speaking to all of us! The angels of God have been sent to each and every one of us, giving us a vision for our life that is bigger than we can even understand. And, yet, we have to be able to hold it from a place of faith. We have to be able to say, *“Yes!”* Because we have free will ... When the Spirit of God comes to us – when a

divine idea, when an inspiration comes to us – because we have free will, we can dismiss it. But Mary – from that pure, innocent place – said *“Yes!” to it.*

And I really want you to see that that’s where Christmas happens!!! When the birth of Christ happens in each and every one of us. When an idea out of the mind of God – an idea that is bigger and greater than anything we’ve ever lived before ... And the Spirit of God whispers in our ear and says, *“This possibility is available to you,”* and we don’t push it away. We just say, *“Yes! Let me be the servant. Let me be the servant of this idea. Let me be the servant of this possibility. Let me be the servant of this much good. Let that live in me! Let my soul magnify the Lord! Let my soul express all the good that God is.”*

See, that’s faith! Like, this story is a non-starter if Mary doesn’t have the faith to say, *“Yes!”* Nothing that happens after this moment is even a possibility if Mary doesn’t have the faith to say, *“Yes!”*

So let’s break faith down for a minute. And what I want you to see is that God has made promises to each one of us. If we go back in the Scripture, I’m going to point out seven promises that God has already made to each and every one of us. That there are universal promises that have been made to each and every one of us, but they only work if we have the faith to receive them.

If I write you a check ... Let’s just say I write you a check for \$10,000. It’s not happening, but let me just pretend, right? If I write you a check for \$10,000, and I really want you to cash it. I want you to have that money. You know, I don’t usually carry around \$10,000 with me, and if I wanted you to have it ... You know, there’s the story of George Clooney giving 14 of his close friends a million dollars cash. Well, most of us don’t carry that level of loot around with us, right?

So if I wanted to give you \$10,000 – don’t count on it – but if I wanted to give you \$10,000, right? You’d actually have to have the faith to know that that check is good. You’d actually have to have faith to actually take that check to the bank and either deposit it or cash it. But you’d actually have to have the faith to believe. If you didn’t believe it was good ... If you didn’t believe that my intention was for you to have it ... If you didn’t have the faith to know that I wanted you to have it ... If you didn’t have the sense of worthiness to really receive that gift ... You would just rip up the check! Or you’d just put it in your pocket or you’d lose it or you’d throw it away. But it takes a degree of faith to receive the gifts of God.

So what are these seven gifts?

First one. The first gift that God promised us is that he’d give us the Promised Land. And what is the Promised Land? In Joshua: *“To Joshua God said, ‘Everything that the soles of your feet will touch I have given you.’” [Laughs]* I want you to hear that, right? I want you to imagine that – as big as your life is; as much as you could imagine – the Spirit of God is speaking to each and every one of us saying, *“Every place that the soles of your feet can touch, I have given unto you.”* I’ve given to you! I have given to you!

So no matter how big you imagine your life can be – no matter how blessed you believe that you can be – what I want you to see today is that God has promised that wherever the soles of your feet touch, God has already given it to you. That you could not have an idea that is bigger than what God has already promised you!

Two: the kingdom. Jesus said, *“It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”* God has already promised us the kingdom! We don’t have to make a deal for it; we don’t have to work for it. The promise, from the beginning of time, is that we’ve already been given the kingdom. Now, you don’t ever have to claim it. You don’t ever have to live in it. You don’t ever have to ask for the keys. You don’t ever have to move into the kingdom. But you have already been given the kingdom! The kingdom of heaven is within you and all around you! You’ve been given the kingdom.

Three: *"I came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly."* That is a promise! That is a promise from God! That you were given life and the abundance to enjoy it! Right?

Four: *"He gives strength to the weary."* Especially this year! I want you to hear the promise directly from God that, when you're weary – when you're tired; when you're overwhelmed – God will give you strength. God will give you strength for whatever the need, whatever the situation. God will give you strength.

And five: *"Do not worry about what you should eat or what you should drink or what you should wear."* The promise is that every one of your earthly needs will be taken care of by God. Now, if you don't believe that, you don't ever really get to experience it. But the reality is that every one of your earthly needs will be taken care. Whatever you need to eat; whatever you need to drink; whatever you need to wear; whatever you need to sleep; whatever you need for housing. Whatever you need, it will be taken care of by God. Now, it may not be exactly the way you think it should be met! We may not be living at a condo at the beach. But I guarantee: whatever you need – all of your earthly needs – will be absolutely taken care of. But if you want to create a condo at the beach, absolutely! Because you were given an infinite supply of God's good.

Six: *"Even before you ask, I will hear you."* That's a promise! That whatever you ask of God, even before you ask it, it is provided. It is provided! It's yours!

And seven: *"And so we know that we rely on God, for God loves us."* The last promise I want you to hear today is the promise that God loves you. God loves you! God loves you with infinite, unconditional love that you can take to the bank. God loves me! God loves us!

Okay. Let's look at faith. Now that we know the promises, let's look at faith. And I want to look at four levels of this. I want to look at blind faith, sometimes called "childish faith." I want to look at hope. I want to look at expectations. And I want to look at mature faith.

Okay; let's start with blind faith, or childish faith. Blind faith, or childish faith, is like a child who goes and sits on Santa's lap, and asks for it, knowing that it will be done. The childish faith is that place of innocence that just naturally believes. It's the part of us that believes in a level of greater good. That we don't have to understand it. We don't know how it's going to work out. None of the details we worry about. From this place of just blind faith, or childish faith, we ask, believing. And this faith is powerful! And it's adorable. It comes out of a place of innocence that has no concern about how it's all going to work out. Doesn't control. Doesn't manipulate. Just asks with just absolute knowing that it's going to work.

Now, what happens for many of us – and what creates hope – is that the moment we get disappointed, blind faith goes out the window. The moment we don't always get exactly what we want, this blind or childish faith goes out the window. And, depending on how many times you've been hurt – how many times you've been disappointed, how many times you've been frustrated – that's where hope comes in. Hope is the ability to begin to be willing to be lifted up off the floor when we feel like life's taken us to our knees, and begin to hope again. Hope is that activity that allows us to begin to believe, even after we've been disappointed. And, for many of us, that's the place where we are right now. After a tough year – after getting knocked down a bit – it requires hope for us to get back on our feet. It requires hope for a greater day. It requires hope.

Now, hope isn't a full, mature belief in faith. Hope is the willingness to believe again. It's the willingness to go beyond the disappointments of the past. It's the willingness to be knocked down, but get back up again. Because the moment we don't get back up again, we are truly lost. The game is over. Our goals –

our desires – will never be met. We have to have the hope that gets us back on our feet. Back moving in the direction of our good. And that's the role of hope.

Now, let's look at expectations. Expectations always come out of the ego. Because the difference between faith and an expectation is: an expectation absolutely knows how this whole thing's going to work. That it's not just enough ... In faith there's a desire that we are moving into manifestation. In an expectation, you're telling the Universe how it's going to work. You're telling the people around you: *"I have an expectation that Uncle Harry won't drink."* And then we get disappointed when Uncle Harry drinks, right? We have an expectation that we won't gain weight during the holidays, and we gain weight during the holidays. Right?

So an expectation is always an ego state. And it's always based, usually, on physical reality. And it's always based on telling God – telling the Universe, telling life – how exactly it's going to be. And what faith is: Faith is the assurance ...

I want to read from Charles Fillmore, the co-founder of Unity. He writes this: *"Now faith is the perceiving power of mind..."* That means the power of our mind to tap into the infinite mind of God. *"Faith is the perceiving power of mind linked to the power to shape substance: spiritual assurance that the power to do seemingly impossible. It is the magnetic power that draws unto us our heart's desire from the invisible spiritual substance. Faith is a deep knowing that that which I desire already is mine in consciousness. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for."*

So now I want you to see what really faith is. Faith is your ability to claim any spiritual possibility, and to watch it manifest in your life. But the difference between faith and an expectation is you don't tell God how to be God! Like, if I have a desire – whatever my desire is – I have to let go of the "how" and hang on to the "what."

If I tell the Universe I want to get a new job and it has to be this way and this way and this way, what I want you to begin to see is: the more we have expectations, many times it's actually an act where we don't always have the faith that we need. That, if we're going to give birth to greater and greater good ... If we're going to allow the fullness of Christ to be born in us during this holiday season ... If we're going to become the full expression of all that God is in our life ... We have to stand in our faith while we let go of how it's going to work. Because the reality is: nobody would have guessed that 2020 would go this way. But what I want to assure you is that you can be blessed, even in this year, if you let go of your expectations on how it's going to go, and be open and receptive to all the ways that God wants to bless you this year. Especially at Christmas!

Whatever the most important thing is to you – whether you want to feel loved, or you want to feel connected, whether you want to experience beauty, or you want to experience joy ... If you hang on to the spiritual quality, let go of the expectations, but have faith that your greatest desire will be met this year, I double-dog guarantee that you can have one of the best Christmases you've ever had.

Let's take that into prayer?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to the activity of God. That today we give thanks; we gave thanks for all that God is. We give thanks for Christmas. And that the presence of the Christ is born in each one of us. We give thanks, and we know that God is blessing us so fully, so completely. We say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And so it is. Amen.

COLLECTION

This is the time of giving of our gifts and tithes. And I want to thank you all for your generous support of this ministry this year: for all the ways that you've reached out and made a commitment to the spiritual

support of this ministry to allow this work of this ministry to go on, especially during this crucial time. So our offering blessing is ... And I want you to imagine your gift, whatever it is – even if you’re going to give electronically – I want you to imagine your gift, and we’re going to say together: *“Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive.”* Together: *“Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I am, all that I have, all that I give and all that I receive.”* And so it is. Amen. I know I always mess it up; just forgive me! And we’re going to have a great Christmas anyway!

CLOSING

God bless you, friend! I see you having a fabulous Christmas, and know that I look forward to being with you next week!

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