My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Advent Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

My Catholic friends mentioned the context of this text to me one day when I was in middle school. At the time, I had just been confirmed, was president of my youth group and we were all seekers, trying to figure out this business about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and not only how it all connected in the Bible, but what God’s role was in our lives. My Catholic friends had a name for today’s text: The Annunciation. That, of course, led to many more questions about the Incarnation, the virgin birth, and in the days where sex education was just coming into the schools, it was a confusing thing.

But this was neither an event nor day that we celebrated in our UCC faith. But the concept was something that I wanted to know more about: God has looked with favor on us. I went to their church to experience what this text meant to them. What I remember from that day in the midst of unfamiliar ritual and religiosity is that God had regarded me.

It is no small thing to be regarded, to be favored, especially when you are exceedingly aware that you should not be. In my reformed church background, we are still haunted by Calvinist tendencies that make us think we’re on God’s naughty list and there’s really nothing you can do to get on the nice list. In my own family, the focus was on the firstborn, and that wasn’t me, either. Self-worth is something that many of us struggle with, and it has to do with identity: who are our influencers, what do we believe, and how do we act (or act out). We need to get these things settled in order to love and be loved.

So we try and avoid the hard work of identity by focusing outside of ourselves. Dressing up to show off our favorite or the latest thing, attending gathering after gathering to show we have friends, giving things that we want for people rather than giving what they want or need. We want to be noticed. We long to belong in the world.

This story of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is surrounded by the impossible. We have to look a little beyond our scripture today to understand it. Elizabeth’s story brackets Mary’s. Just before today’s text for this Sunday is Elizabeth’s pain-filled yet wondrous words, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.” This impossibility demands that we hear Mary’s story as equally incredulous. The angel’s confession that “nothing is impossible for God” finds its deepest meaning in that impossibility abounds, that a barren, elderly woman is pregnant, that a young teenage girl from a nothing town is favored. The Christmas story is not about riches, gifts, or showing off. It’s about incredulity because what happens isn’t supposed to happen in this world. Our imaginations that might idealize the Christmas story are turned upside down.

Mary herself acknowledges the impossible possibility of God with her first response to Gabriel. She is perplexed and debated or considered different reasons. She debates, reasons about the angel’s greeting when the only thing Gabriel has said so far is, “Greetings, highly favored one! The Lord is with you.” Mary’s initial response to this encounter is worth significant pause. The angel has barely said a thing.

Why is Mary bewildered? To call attention to Mary’s response to the angel’s first words is to emphasize to what extent Mary cannot even believe this impossible possibility. Me? Who am I? Why am I favored? How can the Lord be with me? She knows her place. She knows who she is—this should NOT be happening. She’s a teenager, and from the wrong side of the tracks. Gabriel then tells her the big news that she’s going to be pregnant with a son, but not just any son, the Son of the Most High, no less, from the lineage of David, with a never-to-end kingdom. OK. What? “How can this be?”

Can we voice her disbelief with the kind of incredulity that must have been Mary’s? Or, do follow our Calvinist tendencies to perpetuate an obedient response, relegating Mary’s true astonishment to some sort of obligatory prophetic answer? “God has come down, today, right here, right now, to me.”

Advent is a season of preparation for that realization. “God has come down, today, right here, right now, to me”. Let’s dig into that a little bit.

There are many of us still in the absence of God, as Mary is in verse 34. God can’t be here, invading my life, with all the questions, sins, doubts, and things I’ve done and who I am. How can this be that God comes down to me? What have I done to deserve this attention? Many of us still wonder about God’s presence in our lives, as expressed in verse 35, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” How many of us understand that, sitting here? When God enters our life fully and completely, we are animated and controlled by the Spirit, not our egos and our own wants. And how many of us Mary’s response, “I am God’s servant, may your Word be fulfilled”.

It's overwhelming to us who have been in the world and know its limits and what happens when we trust too much without asking questions of what is put before us. Yet it is the promise of Christmas.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We are asked to understand Mary’s moving from the absence of God, to the presence of God, to the fulfillment of the promises of God happens all at once, in the miracle of the Annunciation. If we leave it there, it’s a nice story and tells us about her. But Mary’s story here with God is our story, too; Mary comes to tell us God descends on us as Jesus enters into the world. She’s not just a pawn in some divine play. She is a prophetess helping us understand that we can move from impossible to possible. We are not defined by the whims and statements of others. We are born into circumstances, but we do not belong to those circumstances.

Do we get that? That means second-born matters, too. Wealth doesn’t buy God’s love. Might doesn’t make right. Mary’s story moves us all from who we think we are to who God calls us to be, from observing God’s grace to actually embodying it. But Mary’s story also demands, at last, that we see the transformation of God. And letting go, and seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, is the ultimate act of love, this last Sunday of Advent.

It's no small journey to go from our comfortable thinking about God to understanding and feeling God in the manger, vulnerable, helpless, and dependent. Christmas is upon us, and so is love. God’s grace is with you on this journey, my brothers and sisters. Thanks be to God, Amen.