

Advent 02 – The Annunciation to Mary

12/08/2024

Scripture 1: (Lk. 1:26-38 ESV)

In the sixth month 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.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered 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 called holy-- the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Sermon:

Like the announcement and prophesy of John's birth, the story of Jesus's annunciation is also like a perfect fairy tale. However, although these two related announcements differ greatly in their recipient's response, the second story builds upon the first and, once again, the names of the persons and places involved enhance the story's context in support of Gabriel's prophetic assertion.

Summarizing this second story, several months after he appeared to Zechariah, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a small town called Nazareth in the region of Galilee. There he appeared to a young, engaged but not yet married, girl named Mary and when he appeared to her, he gave a strange and unconventional greeting. Then, while she was still trying to understand what was going on, he prophesied that she would give birth to God's Messiah.

The shock of his pronouncement caused her to ask him, "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*". To which he responded by explaining how the LORD God would be her Son's natural Father, and the evidence Gabriel offered in support of this humanly impossible occurrence was the fact of Elizabeth's aged pregnancy because "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*".

So, unlike Zechariah: a man who had good and natural reasons to believe Gabriel but did not; Mary: this young girl who was given very little cause to believe a total stranger; believed the angel and therefore, trusted herself to God's divine providence.

- Mary immediately exhibited faith, *pisteuo*, in the LORD and His Word whereas Zechariah did not.

Part of our problem today, as 21st Century Christians, is that we have become so familiar with the general Christmas story that it loses a lot of its wonder; especially the wonder in its individual parts. We are so familiar with it, that we can each tell a rendition of the Christmas story and while we would surely touch upon every important event recorded between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we would convey very little amazement and astonishment. We forget that, both separately and together, the birth narratives of Jesus form a series of extraordinary events culminating in a most glorious incident, the birth of the Savior; the fulcrum of redemptive history; the pivotal moment leading to the redemption of all God's Elect. So, it is because we tend to lose or reduce our sense of wonder, that we are examining these details so closely, looking to rediscover why these stories are just so amazing.

Now, just as in the announcement of John's birth, the names of people and places involved in this story matter greatly to establish the context.

- **Gabriel** – The angel was a “mighty man of God”, powerful and apparently a sight which inspired terror in this young and surprised girl.
- **Galilee** – Was a region in northern Israel: a territory that once belonged to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali (Isaiah 9:1) and was claimed and absorbed by the Assyrian Empire upon the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Over the following centuries, it was resettled by different groups of Gentiles as ownership of the region was traded between warring factions and different empires {Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman}. However earlier, the prophet Isaiah wrote about the redemption and future glorification of this region, saying of it “*But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a*

land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” (Isa. 9:1-2 ESV), describing a time when the light of the Messiah would shine upon them or come from within them.

- **Nazareth** – Is a town that is never directly mentioned within the Old Testament, but whose name comes from the Hebrew root of *natzar*, a word that can mean “to guard” or “to watch” (thereby suggesting the presence of a watchtower or, at least, being a place with a good, natural visual advantage. Historical Nazareth was located on the top of a high hill or mountainside) and also, more appropriate to this prophetic story, *natzar* is a word used to describe a “branch” or a new “shoot” of growth. This last interpretation of the town's name causes Nazareth's presence in the story of Jesus' birth and life to connect with another prophecy of Isaiah's, “*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch [natzar] from his roots shall bear fruit.*” (Isa. 11:1 ESV).
- **Joseph** – A name which means, “he will increase”, is a good and strong name for any father but especially for the adoptive father of the Savior. We would expect such a man to be an encourager; someone who would teach Jesus right from wrong, to teach Him the Torah, and to help build Him up in the *pisteuo* of His Heavenly Father. Yes, Jesus is God the Son and as such He is omniscient in His divine nature, but we do not confuse that with the degree of His knowledge and understanding in His human nature, especially as a young child considering that Luke explains, “*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.*” (Lk. 2:52-3:1 ESV).
- **David** – A name meaning “beloved”, but used here specifically as the “house of David”: the ancient and legitimate royal house; a family which did not presently enjoy any social favor, prestige, honor, or even any unity as a cohesive group. Due to the many wives and many children of Solomon, David's son and successor, by this time, the descendants of David were innumerable and without any clear hierarchy or priority. Thus making it so that none could have a firm claim upon the throne by “right of natural generation”, and where anyone could potentially stake a claim, if they achieved enough social support, something which both the Hasmoneans and the Herodians would certainly seek to prevent.
- **Mary or Miriam** – A name which has an uncertain or a variety of meanings. The name Mary is derived from Miriam, calling forward the memory of Moses' sister, and her name is etymologically related to either or both *mayim*: meaning “sea” or “waters” (Genesis 1:2); and *mara*: meaning “bitter” or “drops” (Exodus 15:23; Ruth 1:20). Her name seems to suggest a “sea of bitterness” or even “tears”, which would foreshadow the future sweep of her life as being characterized by tears: tears of joy and tears of sadness.
- **Jesus or Yehoshua (or Joshua)** – A name which means “YHVH Saves” and the most appropriate name for the God-Man and Son of God, because through Him and His work, YHVH would save His Elect.

However, while it is not a name, there is another important and context defining term used within Luke's introduction to this story; the term which is twice translated as “virgin” in verse 27: *parthenos*.

- *parthenos* – This term carried a very definite and specific use within the ancient, Greek-speaking world. It was used particularly to describe a female virgin: a young, unmarried woman who had never “known a man” {euphemistically}. The term is most famously associated with a place in Greece: the Parthenon; an ancient Temple to “Athena, the Virgin” which historically, was populated and operated by virgins dedicated in service to the Greek gods. Yes, there has been controversy within the church due to different forms of Criticism, related to Isaiah 7:14, “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” (Isa. 7:14 ESV), where the Hebrew term used was *almah*, which was used for any young woman (but still carrying the

implication of virginity); yet the Greek Septuagint translated *almah* as *parthenos*. Jewish scholars located in Egypt, interpreted that Isaiah passage and translated it, a couple of hundred years before the birth of Jesus; so this plain understanding as a “virgin” could not be a later, Christian, metaphysical corruption of the text. Therefore, this term provided two very specific meanings and implications for the original readers and hearers of Luke's Gospel: Mary was surely a physical virgin and that through this story {and this story alone} Mary would play a certain kind of “sacred” role by her “begetting” of Jesus, as the *theotokos* or “God-bearer” {and the only correct way to affirm her as the “mother of God”, by her role in the incarnation}, making the literal understanding of the “virgin birth” a necessary doctrine of the Christian faith since Mary's physical status prior to and through the Holy Spirit's activity defines:

- Jesus's natural relationship with Joseph (as his adopted Son);
- Jesus's federal relationship with Adam (as being not a natural heir of Adam and thus not a recipient of Adam's original sin and guilt, thereby preserving His natural, ontological holiness);
- Jesus's natural relationship with God the Father (as His only begotten Son; *mongenes*);
- Jesus's federal, mediatorial role as the Son of God (Luke 3:38), like Adam yet different; His role as the “last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45); and,
- Jesus's unique nature as the God-man (fully human and fully divine without mixture, confusion, or division).

When Gabriel appeared to Mary, he made two distinct prophecies concerned who her Son would be:

- the first was about His relationship to David and the blessing He would receive from the LORD because of that relationship; and,
- the second was about His relationship to the LORD and how that would come about.
- The first is the ultimate fulfillment of the LORD's promise to King David; and,
- the second is an echo of original God's creation of Adam.

But first, before prophesying, he set the stage for this pronouncement by his greeting, "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*"; a greeting which troubled her. It troubled her and it confused her, because it was so strange and extraordinary. It would not have even been a normal type greeting for someone high up within the social aristocracy. She tried to discern, she tried to reason out what the angel meant by his greeting.

Calling her “favored” implies that she had or was receiving some special grace; a grace which he defined as being the LORD's presence. However, it was unclear to her whether this was meant to be: the grace of the LORD's presence and favor simply because she was a Jew and belonged to Israel; or, because she was simply a rather fortunate and blessed girl (someone whom the world would call “lucky”, but there is no such thing as luck); or, the LORD was present and with her in a more specific and personal capacity, as the LORD was with David or as the LORD was with His prophets. The story suggests that her reasoning led her to assume the third option, the thought of which terrified her and that is why Gabriel continued by saying “*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*”; reassuring her and trying to calm her. He essentially told her, {Do not be scared, Mary. God is going to do something very special and very good for you.}

But what was the special and good thing that the LORD would favor her with? “*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of*

the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

- First, she would become pregnant and bear a son; surely that is the best verbal blessing a young woman, about to be married, could hope for. Get married and have children, {have lots of children because the mortality rate was so high} who would eventually take care of her and probably take over the family business. Who would not be happy to hear that kind of good news?
- Second, that she would call this son, Jesus, which is a good strong and hopeful name; a name which demonstrates hope and trust in the LORD and His gracious providence.

Yet it is after this second part that this prophecy becomes strange and extraordinary.

- Third, that *“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”*. Please note that this was not just some pretty platitude, but a very specific title. We know that “son of God” was a title used by the Roman Emperors from Caesar Augustus {Octavian, the biological nephew of Julius Caesar and his adopted son (and intended heir who was forced to fight two wars: first, against Julius' assassins [Cassius and Brutus] and second, against Marc Antony [his former ally in vengeance against Cassius and Brutus]; before he could lay uncontested claim to the Empire} onward; after Augustus deified his immediate predecessor, Julius, beginning this tradition. This fact is something which made the early Christians use of that title for Jesus politically subversive. But, that particular use is not relevant here because at that time only Augustus had claimed it and he had been reigning for 20+ years {Caesar Augustus reigned from 27 BC until 14 AD}. However, across the history of the Ancient Near East, it was a common title claimed by countless kings. It would have been used by the Persians and the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and especially the Davidic Dynasty of Judah because of the King's ordained role {as a technical *christ*} as the LORD's regent on earth and it was a titular perspective promoted within the Psalms (most notably Psalm 2 and in the Davidic Covenant found in 2 Samuel 7), with the king as God's “adopted” son.
 - So, to Mary's mind, from within her Jewish context, this title could only refer to one person: the true, legitimate, divinely appointed, Davidic, King of Israel; because even Herod, with all of his pomp and self-righteousness, did not claim that title for himself because his earthly power and authority came from Rome {as a client-king} (although we understand that **all** earthly authority still originates with and is appointed by God).
- Fourth, her initial understanding of this as a kingly title was confirmed when Gabriel continued, *“And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*, promising that her son would receive the benefit of the LORD's promise to King David, *“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, **I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son** (the justification for “Son of the Most High”). *When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”*” (2 Sam. 7:12-16 ESV).*

It is no wonder that she was so incredulous and confused by this because the expected benefits of that promise were claimed by the Davidic royal line, right up until the kingdom fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC and were never restored even during the governorship of Zerubbabel, following the return from the Exile because rule

over Judea and the Jews had bounced between various Gentile warlords and conquerors. Meanwhile, the Hasmonean dynasty of kings and priests had arisen from within the tribe of Levi (and not Judah or the line of David), and presently they were ruled by Herod {the Great} the son of Antipater (an Idumean, or Edomite, and likely a cultural convert to Judaism [Josephus Antiquities 14.8]) {Jewish in Name Only}, who was called the “King of the Jews”. So, to all appearances and everyone's honest expectation, the LORD's promise to King David had failed long ago; but still, a faithful remnant trusted to hope in the LORD.

Later Luke will present a genealogy of Jesus {in chapter 3 of his Gospel} and because it is different from the genealogy presented in Matthew, we ordinarily interpret Luke's as being Mary's lineage and Matthew's as being Joseph's; but the most important thing about both lists is that they demonstrate a natural {and/or “legal”} descent from King David, proving how Jesus legitimately inherits this blessed prophetic and human benefit.

Regardless, this unexpected prophecy to this betrothed young woman was beyond shocking, and not only because believing and promoting it would technically be considered treasonous. As far as she was concerned, as far as her culture and community were concerned, Mary was a “nobody” from “nowhere” and her fiance' was also a “nobody” from “nowhere”, without any fortune or influential family. It is reasonable to think that before this moment, Mary expected to simply live a quiet and simple life of poverty and subsistence living as the wife of a carpenter.

Furthermore, her shocked reply questioning the angel, “*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*”, is also understandable because people did not make this kind of pronouncement about an expected child, unless a child was presently being expected.

- Did Mary wonder if people thought she looked pregnant?
- Did Mary worry that people were gossiping about her and Joseph, or about her and some other guy?
- Did Mary just think that the man (angel) standing before her was simply crazy?

Really, her initial response was also in defense of her honor because chastity was greatly valued and important, and, although it is translated here as “*since I am a virgin*”, the Greek is more simply read euphemistically as, “since I have not known (*ginisko*) a man”. She was defending herself and asserting that she had not done anything improper, immoral, unchaste, or dishonoring to either her family or her betrothed. Yet her response was received as a legitimate question by Gabriel, rather than as an assertion of Mary's disbelief or a denial; as “*How will this be...?*”. So, he explained and described how.

“*And the angel answered 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 called holy-- the Son of God."*”. Sadly and unfortunately, religious liberals over the past hundred and fifty years or so, have done repeated violence to this passage by claiming that what Gabriel describes to Mary is akin to “divine rape” or, as I heard someone argue recently¹ that through this story, Mary “gave permission to God” to let her be the mother of Jesus: intentionally inserting the helpful idea of “consent” into this story; and then implying that since Mary was therefore given a choice to not be Jesus' mother, she had more “rights” than do American women who live in States where abortion access is limited or prohibited {and the person who said this is a younger guy and self described “Progressive Christian Leader”}. But really none of that is present within this passage. Instead, those are examples of people trying to force Scripture to say whatever it is that they wish it would say, rather than what God says.

1 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1263170858292928&rdid=0HtzDJ6EJiQ8gPsr>

Instead, what Gabriel describes and the language he uses is reminiscent of Genesis 2:7, “...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” (Gen. 2:7 ESV):

- where {the Holy Spirit coming upon her} echoes God {forming the man from the dust of the earth}; and,
- where {God's power “overshadowing” her} is an echo of God {breathing into Adam “the breath of life”}.

As Adam was formed from the dust of the earth and Mary was his natural descendant and thus also “dust”, so too the LORD (by His Holy Spirit) working upon and within her and causing her to conceive without the participation of a human male is not a different miracle from His original creation of Adam. Therefore, Adam and Jesus share a similar origin and both are justly called the “Son of God”, as Luke will elsewhere tell us (Luke 3:38) and a comparison which Paul will use to explain our expectation of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:45-50).

So then, after explaining how this will happen, Gabriel gives her a reason and evidence to help her believe that what he has said is true and will come to pass, “*And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.*”.

Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, an older woman (presumably older than childbearing age; post-menopause, like Sarah) and Mary's relative, was pregnant: a fact only recently known publicly. So, if what the angel said was true and since Elizabeth was now pregnant (a miracle like the miracles recorded in Scripture), then everything else that he had just said might also prove to be true because, as Gabriel said and as had been proven in history “...nothing will be impossible with God.”.

Therefore, Mary finally responded “*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*” *And the angel departed from her.*”, not as her “giving consent” but as her “assenting” and affirming God's decree. Mary therefore, willingly submitted herself to the LORD's will and providence. She affirmed that if this is what the LORD wills for her, then so be it, because it is truly a work of grace and favor upon her; despite all of the challenges, fears, and troubles that will accompany and eventually come from it.

Mary's agreement to Gabriel's announcement is like our agreement to be saved by Jesus; we neither agree nor give Him our consent, because we were “*dead in our trespasses*” (Ephesians 2:1) and the “dead” cannot consent to anything. Yet we do respond to God's grace by giving Him our assent; by acknowledging and agreeing with what the LORD has Himself chosen to do in our lives, because God does not need our agreement since He is sovereign over all things. So, her response is one more of acceptance than agreement, which is totally appropriate because God's grace, is God's free gift to us; especially the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” (Jn. 3:16-17 ESV).

- Again, God does not need our consent to save us, but we do give our assent and must agree that He has done so, before we can live the changed life of those regenerated and redeemed in Christ.

Ultimately, Mary heard the angel's prophecy and she believed it. She trusted God and she had *pisteuo*, faith, in Him because her faith in the LORD was all that she would have to carry her through everything that was yet to come.

So, what does this story and Mary's faith and example teach us today?

- First, that the promises she received build up and explain our faith and confidence in who Jesus is: the Son of God and our eternal King.
- Second, that the promises she received and their 1st Century fulfillment, should strengthen and encourage our faith to continue believing, even when hope seems lost or when it feels like God has abandoned us. We are reminded to trust Him and His promises because He is faithful and true and that He will always achieve His sovereign purposes even when He seems slow to us.
- Third, that Mary's questioning of the angel's word reminds us that it is OK to ask questions of God; to ask questions about our faith, about what we believe and why we believe it. Asking questions is **not** a sign of disbelief or the absence of faith, but a sign of our desire to know more and to know God (Jesus) better. Asking challenging questions honestly, of our faith and of God's Word, is a sign that we do have faith because our faith is neither blind nor unreasoning.
- Fourth, that Mary's response of submission and assent exemplifies how Christians should respond to the LORD's decree and the LORD's commandments: with humility and faith; trusting that what the LORD has declared is both for our good and our duty to accept as His subjects and as His beloved and loving children.

So, this Advent season, whenever you hear tell about Gabriel's announcement to Mary, remember how the story fits perfectly into the LORD's great narrative of redemptive history and how her response of faith and trust in God is a wonderful example for us to follow once we know that Jesus, God the Son, has saved us.

AMEN