

**Luke 1:26-38 (Fourth Sunday in Advent—Series B)**

**“A Tale of Two Announcements”**

**Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT**

**December 20, 2020**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the Gospel lesson recorded in Luke 1:26-38:

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> 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.

When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade—yes, I know that was a long time ago—we read Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Its setting is the cities of London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. In Luke chapter 1, we have a different narrative, a "tale of two announcements." The messenger for both announcements was the angel Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God (1:19). He was sent by God Himself to speak messages of good news, first to a priest in Jerusalem and second, to a girl in the village of Nazareth.

Gabriel's message to the priest Zechariah was a birth announcement. Luke records that both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (1:6-7). Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah in the temple was a good-news message for him and his wife, "Do not be afraid,

Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord” (Luke 1:13–15 ESV). Congratulations! It’s a boy! A boy who will serve the Lord and prepare the people for the coming of God-made-flesh in the person of the promised Messiah.

But Zechariah didn’t believe the angel’s message. “I’m old and my wife is old. We’re too old to have kids.” Case closed. There is no way what Gabriel says can be possible. It goes against plain reason and doesn’t consider the real situation.

Six months later, the angel Gabriel is again sent from God with a birth announcement. This time, the angel goes to Nazareth, a village of Galilee. He was sent from God to “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.” Again, it is a good-news message of joy. Mary had found favor with God. The Lord “had given his favor to one who had no claim to worthy status, raised her up from a position of lowliness, and [had] chosen her to have a central role in salvation history.”<sup>1</sup> The virgin would conceive and bear a son and would call His name Jesus. Congratulations! It’s a boy!

Mary, unlike Zechariah, didn’t discount the validity and truth of the angel’s message. Nothing in the text indicates that she did not believe, as it is stated about Zechariah. The announcement to Mary is just as improbable and illogical as the one to Zechariah, and I think even more so! At least Zechariah and Elizabeth were married, and they knew each other as husband and wife. Mary had not known a man. She was a virgin. Biologically, this

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<sup>1</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 87.

is impossible. Mary simply asks, "How can this be?" The angel's message from God Himself was this: "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" (Luke 1:35–37 ESV).

Mary responded to the good-news message differently than Zechariah. She believed the angel's words. "Let it be to me according to your word," she said. She placed herself in the service of the Lord for His Word to be accomplished in her and through her. Mary responded with a Spirit-given faith in the promise of God. Luther wrote: "She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day."<sup>2</sup>

How do we respond to the good news words of promise? I think we'd all like to say that we always respond with faith like Mary. But sometimes we do respond like Zechariah, if not with unbelief, with a faithless doubt or a serious wonder whether or not God's promises to us are true. How can it be that the holy God who made the heavens and the earth loves sinners like us so much that He would give His One-of-a-Kind Son that whoever would believe in Him would receive eternal life? How can it be that, to purchase eternal life for humanity, the Divine Second Person of the Holy Trinity became fully human, yet without sin, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary? How is it even possible that Jesus, true God and true Man, suffered the wrath and punishment of God

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, Roland Bainton, ed., (W. L. Jenkins, 1948), 15.

against the sins of the world as He bled and died on the cross, securing with His blood the forgiveness of sins for everyone?

It's possible because God promised. It can only be since God is the One making it happen. The conception and birth of John—God's doing. The conception and birth of God the Son in human flesh in the person of Jesus—God's doing. Forgiveness of sins and everlasting life freely given to sinful humans without any merit or worthiness in us—God's doing. God promises. God speaks His Word. And His Word does what He promises it will do. Isaiah 55: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Is. 55:10–11 ESV).

It is faith in the good-news Word of God's promise to us in the Gospel that make all the different for you and me. Will doubts arise? Absolutely. Will we have questions that have no answer? Yes. But we need not disbelieve what the Lord has spoken to us in His Word. As the father of the demon-possessed child in Mark 9 responded to Jesus, we too can pray, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24 ESV). That's the cry of faith.

This Advent, I've been reading some of Martin Luther's sermons on the Epistles and Gospels for these Sundays in the Church Year. I have to admit that on this Fourth Sunday in Advent I am several weeks behind. But that's okay; it's worth the slow read. As we consider faith in the promises of God's Word, faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life, I was drawn back to what Pastor Luther preached about this very thing in

his sermon for the First Sunday in Advent. I believe this may get to the heart of Zechariah's response and Mary's response to the Lord's Word spoken by Gabriel in this tale of two announcements.

"I have often said that there are two kinds of faith. The first is that you certainly believe that Christ is the kind of man described and proclaimed here and in the entire Gospel, but you do not believe that He is such a man for you, and you doubt whether you have and will have this from Him, and you think: 'Yes, He is such a man to the others, such as St. Peter, Paul, and the godly saints. But who knows whether He is such to me and whether I may expect the same from Him and may confide in it, as these saints did?' . . .

[The] faith that alone is called 'Christian faith,' [is] when you believe without any wavering that Christ is such a one not only for St. Peter and the saints but also for you, and even more so for you than for all the others. Your salvation does not depend on the fact that you believe Christ to be Christ for the godly, but that He is Christ for you and is your own. . . . But if you want to be a Christian, you must let these words be spoken to you, to you, to you, and cling to them and believe without any doubt that it will happen to you just as the words say."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it was, that at first, Zechariah did not receive God's good-news message as a message "for you" and that Mary did. As your pastor in Christ, I want you to receive God's Word, His Gospel message, as a message that is specifically for each one of you. For you—Jesus, the Son of the Most High, was conceived in Mary's womb by the power of the Spirit who came upon her. For you—the holy Son of God became flesh and dwelt among

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Church Postil 1*, vol. 75, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 29-31.

us. For you—Jesus lived a sinless life in your place so that it would be credited to you as righteousness. For you—Jesus died to pay for your sinfulness in full, to win your forgiveness, to make you at peace with God. For you—Jesus rose again from the dead, the firstfruits of the resurrection to life in body and soul which guarantees your bodily resurrection on the Last Day. For you—Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, the Father Almighty where He prepares a place for you. For you—Jesus will come again in glory to bring you into a new creation.

The Gospel is God's good-news message to you, Christ Jesus for you. It is a message that you can trust, an announcement that you can hold on to. Nothing is impossible with God. Your sins are forgiven because Jesus died and rose for you. Let it be **to you** according to His Word. Amen.