

Sermon/Bible Class for December 16, 2012 – Advent 3

The Annunciation to Mary– Luke 1:26-56

It has been six months since Gabriel was sent to Zechariah. The heavens are astir once again. Why? Because Gabriel has been commissioned to tell a virgin that she would become the mother of God.

We read:

Mary and Joseph (verses 26-27)

²⁶ *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

Instead of the ancient, glorious city of Jerusalem, Gabriel is now sent to little, despised Nazareth – a city so insignificant that it is not even mentioned in the Old Testament. Instead of an honored priest in a glorious temple, Gabriel is sent to a poor, young virgin. And why? To tell the greatest news any daughter of Eve could ever imagine receiving.

Mary was the name of this young woman, and we imagine her to be around 16 years old (the age at which, according to the custom of the time, most young ladies would become engaged). She was a descendant of King David – the royal family that once stood tall as a majestic oak in Israel, but that was now reduced to nothing but a stump. She was pledged in marriage to Joseph, who was also a descendant of King David.

Now, when we say she was “pledged in marriage” we mean something more than engagement. Jewish marriage customs at that time were different than ours and reflect a very high regard for marriage and God’s gift of sex which is reserved for marriage. When a man and woman pledged themselves in marriage before their parents, they were in fact married – so much so that one would have needed a certificate of divorce to break the pledge. But, here is the important part, Joseph and Mary had not consummated their marriage as husband and wife. According to Jewish custom, that would happen after the “wedding” feast. Because of this, Mary was still a virgin - something that is stressed throughout this account.

Why is it so important to believe in a “virgin” birth?

[*Answer:* Because if Jesus was simply born in that natural way, there would be nothing special about him. He would be just like anyone of us, and would have inherited a sinful nature just like we all have. The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin shows that He is special. It shows that He was able to take on our human nature without inheriting the corruption of sin we all inherit from our fathers. Most importantly, it shows that He is God incarnate, which means “God in the flesh”]

The Annunciation (verses 28-33)

²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*

Notice that not only the angel’s presence struck fear in the heart of Mary, but also his greeting. Why? Because what would the LORD want with a poor 16 year old girl like her? Why is she experiencing this grace from God when she is nothing special – a sinner like the rest of us? What does the angel mean?

³⁰ *But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*

The terms “highly favored” and “found favor” are really the word for grace, or “underserved love”. The angel is telling Mary that God has decided to make her an object of his wonderful, underserved love and honor. And what honor would that be? That she would be the mother of the long awaited Messiah! Remembering that the meaning of “grace” is “undeserved love,” try to answer the question:

Why was Mary chosen to be the mother of Jesus?

[Answer: The answer is in the word “grace.” Mary did nothing to deserve such an honor, as she later confesses. She was a sinner like the rest of us. She was chosen simply because God, in his infinite wisdom, chose to show her this great honor. By grace Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus. By grace, those who believe have been chosen to be Jesus’ brothers and sisters – fully forgiven because of His work for us.]

Our text continues:

³¹ *You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.* ³² *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,* ³³ *and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

Jesus was a common name at that time. It was the Greek version of the Hebrew name “Joshua”. The difference between this Joshua – this Jesus – and every other one alive at that time is that He would truly be what his name means. He is “The LORD’s salvation!”

The angel says that he will be great. How great? The greatest. He is the descendant that God promised King David, when He told him some 700 years before Jesus birth:

¹² *When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.* ¹³ *He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.* ¹⁴ *I will be his father, and he will be my son. . . .* (2 Samuel 7:12-14)

He is the one, of whom the LORD says: ⁶ *“I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”* ⁷ *I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.* (Psalm 2:6-7)

Now, it should be understood from the get-go that the LORD never intended his Son to be a political king. As Jesus himself says: *“My kingdom is not of this world.* (John 18:36) No, Jesus’ kingdom is spiritual. It spans all dimensions: the heavens, the earth and under the earth. His rule is to eternally benefit His people. All who believe in him, regardless of their race or nationality, belong to his kingdom; as St. Paul says: ⁷ *Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.* (Galatians 3:7) ¹⁷ *As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”* (Romans 4:17)

What comfort do we find in Jesus’ name?

[Answer: That He is the LORD’s salvation. Our God is merciful, not wanting anyone to perish eternally. This is why He sent His Son to be our Savior. Every time we speak Jesus’ name, we can think of God’s saving love.]

The Explanation (verses 34-38)

Last Sunday we saw that Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah was met with doubt, as he asked for a sign. Mary receives the angel’s message in faith. She does not doubt and does not ask for a sign. But she does ask:

³⁴ *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

It’s because she believed the angel that she asked how this will come about. Why? Because she needed to know how to fulfill her role. Should she be married to Joseph or not? She is a virgin, so how will she get pregnant. Does she need to do something?

³⁵ *The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*

No, Mary would not have to do anything. She would remain a virgin. This would be God's glorious work.

To describe the indescribable the angel uses language that points back to the time of Moses under Mount Sinai – right after the tabernacle was built. The tabernacle – a portable temple – was the place where God made his presence known to the Israelites. He did it by filling the tabernacle with his glory – the pillar of fire and smoke that accompanied the Israelites in the desert. We read about this in Exodus:

³³ *Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work.* ³⁴ *Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* ³⁵ *Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon (literally – “overshadowed”) it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* (Exodus 40:33-35)

In other words, Gabriel is telling Mary: “Remember how the Spirit of the LORD filled the tabernacle with his mighty presence? This is what is going to happen to you, Mary. Your womb will be his temple, his dwelling place. And in your womb, God is going to work a miracle. The infinite and almighty God – whom the heavens and the earth cannot contain – will don human flesh and blood – using one of your ova to do it. He will wrap himself in human DNA, pouring out his divine attributes into it, performing a miracle that no one but God could ever fathom. This is what the Holy Spirit will do in you, Mary. You will remain a virgin from now until after Jesus is born.”

And even though she didn't ask for one, the angel gives her a sign and someone to talk to about this great miracle:

³⁶ *Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.* ³⁷ *For nothing is impossible with God."*

What comfort does the angel's statement, “for nothing is impossible with God,” give us?

[*Answer:* If God can let a barren woman conceive, and let a virgin give birth, then God can do the impossible and save me from my sins. He can keep me safe in the one true faith, and deliver me safely into his heavenly kingdom.]

In response to this wonderful promise and great responsibility, Mary gives an excellent example faith – one that we should all take to heart and imitate:

³⁸ *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said. " Then the angel left her.*

Elizabeth's Greeting (verses 39-45)

After the angel left, Mary felt impelled to visit her relative, Elizabeth. She wanted someone to talk to about all that took place – someone who would understand and be able to relate to her.

³⁹ *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"*

According to verses 42 & 43, what did Elizabeth know before Mary could even tell her?

[*Answer:* Not only that Mary was pregnant, but that she was pregnant with her “Lord” – with her God and Savior.]

According to verse 41, how could she know?

[Answer: She was filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave her this revelation]

What a greeting Elizabeth gave Mary. The first thing she tells Mary is how blessed she is – blessed above all women. The ability to bear children is a blessing and honor from God – something that is sadly forgotten in our radical, feminist society. But Mary’s honor is the greatest. Why? Because she is privileged to be called the mother of the Lord!

Just look and marvel and what Elizabeth is saying! Mary is probably not even a week (or: a few weeks) pregnant, and Elizabeth – by the power of the Holy Spirit, is calling that few days old embryo (which is not even a fetus!) “my LORD.” She is acknowledging it as her Savior and God!

Even more than that, unborn John (who was only conceived six months prior and who would still be considered a fetus by most American scientists) leaps in the womb at the greeting of Mary. In fulfillment of Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah, he is showing himself filled with the Holy Spirit – even while still in the womb! He has faith in the Messiah that stands before him and exhibits his joy.

What do these verses have to say about abortion?

[Answer: Considering the fact that John exhibits faith (which only humans can do) and that Elizabeth calls the embryo inside of Mary “her LORD” – the Bible clearly demonstrated that human life begins at conception. Abortion is murder.]

“The Magnificat” (verses 46-56)

In a wonderful, inspired song of praise - similar to the one Old Testament Hannah offered when she presented her son Samuel to work in the temple, Mary says:

"My soul glorifies the Lord⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name.

In this portion of her song of praise, Mary gives all glory and thanks to God. He alone has done this great thing for her. Notice that she says: “Holy is His name.” In other words she is telling future generations not to praise her as holy, but the LORD God himself, who has shown her such underserved love and honor.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

Who are the proud, the rich and the rulers that God has brought down? They are those who are proud before God, who feel they have no need for him, who put their trust in people and money instead of the Lord. It is these that the LORD humbles – if not now in time, then certainly afterwards when they face him in judgment.

But the humble, the hungry and poor? These are those who recognize their sins and need for a Savior. They are spiritually poor before God – realizing they have nothing to offer God for their sins. They hunger for righteousness and humbly confess their unworthiness before God. These are those that the LORD came to save. These are the ones who will be fed with the good things of the Gospel and exalted to the status of being God’s dearly loved sons and daughters.

Mary continues:

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

The Lord has kept his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He promised to send a Savior, and a Savior he sent. All who believe in him are saved. They are reckoned as Abraham's descendants – as we showed earlier. They will live under God's mercy forever – all because of what the promised Messiah would do for them.

⁵⁶ *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months [probably until the time Elizabeth gave birth] and then returned home.*

We have just looked at a most miraculous section of Scripture that is filled with Gospel. But before we leave it, I have one more question for us to ponder:

Using the example of Mary, how should we receive the promises and responsibilities God gives us?

[*Answer:* In faith – humbly submitting to the LORD's will – not worrying or complaining about our lot in life – but thanking God for the promises and responsibilities He gives us and trusting in his strength to see it through. May we ever answer the Lord with the words of Mary: *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."* Amen.