

A Promise of Love

Luke 1:26-38 (Advent 4)

King David sat in his palace one day and he noticed something that troubled him. He was enjoying a beautiful palace made out of cedar while the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol of God's presence, dwelled in nothing more than a tent. So David brought this problem and a solution to his pastor, Nathan. David wanted to build a permanent house for the Lord, a temple. Nathan thought it was a great idea, but God had a different idea. David wanted to show his love for God by building him a house, but instead through Nathan God made a promise of love to David. God had shown his love to David by making him a great king and victory over his enemies. That love would continue as God would build David a house, a family line that would reign on the throne of Israel. But ultimately this promise of love would be so much more than that. It is a promise to show love not just to David, but all people, love shown through the long promised Savior. God would make his dwelling among people not in a temple made by human hands but in flesh and blood through David's family line.

On this Sunday before we celebrate Christmas going to the stable at Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph or sit in the fields with the shepherds, take a step back with me. Let's rejoice together that God's promise of love spoken is one of such wondrous love shown through an unlikely and yet favored young virgin who lived in the town of Nazareth.

Luke tells us that God sent the angel Gabriel there with a very important message. Six months earlier he had been sent to Zecharah with a similar message, a pregnancy announcement. His barren wife, Elizabeth, who was now well beyond the years to have children would have a son named John. We know that child as John the Baptist whose job was to get the people ready for the child at the center of this pregnancy announcement. Now Gabriel was being sent to that little, unimportant town in the region of Galilee. This time to Mary.

Luke who had carefully investigated everything goes to great lengths to tell us about Mary, the man she was pledged in marriage to, and her "status". **"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged in marriage to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.'" (vs. 26-28)**

The angel's greeting troubled her and caused Mary to ponder what this greeting meant. Mary recognized her unworthiness as a sinner. For what reason was this angel appearing to her? Angels just don't pop in and strike up a conversation with you unless there is something important God wanted them to say to you. When was the last time an angel talked to you? What was so important that God would send an angel to Mary, an unworthy sinner? Why would God favor her in such a way? Yet as this greeting troubled her and caused her to ponder what it meant, we marvel more at the message Gabriel had for Mary since it was of the greatest importance.

David's once great line of kings was now nothing. Neither Mary, nor Joseph are sitting on Israel's throne. Yet God was keeping his promise of love to David by sending Great David's greater Son through Mary. Mary was an unlikely person for such a task. Yet she was simply someone God favored and chose. There was nothing special about Mary, but the child she was going to carry in her womb would be great. The angel explains and gives Mary the wondrous news. In this news we not only hear God declaring his love, but showing his love to you and to me doing the impossible through an impossible birth. **"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, because you have found favor with God. Listen, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end.” (vs. 30-33)

As the Son of God, Jesus would do what is impossible for man to do. Mankind, you and I, cannot in any way do anything to save ourselves from our sins. We have no choice but to rely completely on God’s promise of love for that saving. The earthly name God chose for him to be called in this world was no accident. The name “Jesus” or its Hebrew equivalent “Joshua”, may have been a fairly common and ordinary name in the land, but there was nothing ordinary about what this child would do. It was given with the intention of declaring what this child would do. The name “Jesus” means “The Lord saves”. This child would do just that. The Son of the Most High was coming into the world to do the impossible in a way that humanly speaking is impossible - a virgin birth.

Normally when a mother finds out that she is pregnant, it might not be too much of a surprise. The test perhaps just confirmed what was already suspected. However for Mary, this news from God through the angel was a complete surprise which caused a natural question to be asked. Remember, Luke has already told us twice about Mary’s status. She was a virgin. There was no physical or natural way she could have a baby. Mary points that out. **“Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’” (vs. 34)**

When Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he doubted how it was possible for his wife, Elizabeth, at her age to have a child. “How can I be sure of this, because I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years?” he said. As a result of his doubts, Zechariah was literally speechless until John was born. Mary, on the other hand, was not doubting. She was just confused. Wouldn’t you? Mary knew how God created children. She stated the obvious. She was a virgin. Mary was asking for clarification so that she could understand a little better how this impossible reality would be true. Gabriel’s answer doesn’t exactly help us understand exactly how this would be, but it does explain to Mary that this conception would be God’s love at work **“The angel answered her, ‘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. Listen, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age even though she was called barren, and this is her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible for God.’” (vs. 35-37)**

Nothing is impossible for God. God would bring this child into the world in a miraculous way to accomplish what is impossible for man to do, to save them from sin. We call this the miracle of Jesus’ incarnation. Even though we have Gabriel’s wondrous explanation, this is still a mystery that doesn’t make complete sense to us. Jesus was conceived in a miraculous way by the power of God the Holy Spirit. He was born of a virgin who herself is a sinner like the rest of us. Yet Jesus is still the Holy One, the perfectly sinless Son of God.

When we try to rationally figure out how this is possible, reason gets in the way of welcoming the fulfillment of God’s promise of love exactly as it was given. Instead of overthinking Jesus’ birth, in simple faith we receive this wondrous news like Mary did and welcome our Savior at his arrival. **“Then Mary said, ‘See, I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.’” (vs. 38a)**

What a wondrous response to news that she could not fully comprehend! She simply received this message that God’s promise of love was being fulfilled through her. She believed without question and was willing to serve her Lord in exactly the way he would have her serve. When the angel left, Luke tells us that Mary went to visit Elizabeth. It was there she spoke in words of praise at God’s favor toward her and his faithfulness to the promise. We often call those words the Song of Mary.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the

Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:46-55)

Like Mary, we receive this news of God’s love without question. We believe its wondrous and spectacular truth. Jesus, the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, came as the fulfillment of God’s promise of love. His arrival indeed is God showing love to the world, to you, and to me as Great David’s greater Son reigns in our hearts.

In just a few days, we will walk with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem all because Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken. We will sit with the shepherds who heard a birth announcement like no other, “Today a Savior has been born for you, he is Christ the Lord!” We will kneel with those shepherds at his manger bed in awe of this greatest gift God has given to us. Through the coming of Jesus in a miraculous way God is giving us true hope, peace, and joy in this child whom we worship. Standing in awe of such love and how the wondrous way that love was shown, our hearts are ready to receive him. And so we pray with eagerness. “Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” Amen



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