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Luke 1:26–38

10th Message

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NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

As a kid growing up, my parents would wrap our Christmas presents and place them under the tree several days before the big day. They made us promise that we would not touch or shake the presents to try and figure out what the presents were. It was torture, but the anticipation and mystery made Christmas morning that much better.

Christmas is a season of celebration, but it is also a season of mystery. Before there was the great star in the sky hovering over Bethlehem for all to see, before there was a baby born in a manger accepting visiting shepherds and magi, there was a hidden encounter between a teenage girl and an angel.

Last week we reflected on how the angel Gabriel was sent to a childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, announcing that they would have a son named John who would be the promised prophet and forerunner to the coming Messiah. God's promises are being fulfilled. Elizabeth will bear John, but who will bear the coming king?

In our text this morning, Luke has fast-forwarded a few months and once again we hear how God has taken the initiative to save his people. He again sends Gabriel to announce the coming of another miraculous birth, this one more mysterious and far greater than the last.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27)

Luke once again firmly grounds this announcement with historical details of time and place. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sends the angel Gabriel to a young woman living in Nazareth, a town so small and unheard of that Luke must specify its location and that it can be found near the Sea of Galilee. This announcement to Mary parallels the announcement to Zechariah, but the differences are also significant. Whereas the first announcement comes to an aging priest in the midst of a worship service at the high holy place of Israel's capital, this second announcement comes to a humble young woman in a quiet and obscure rural village.

Luke wants us to take notice of a few things about Mary. First, she is a virgin. Twice in one verse Luke highlights that Mary was a virgin. This is an important element in this story for it sets the stage for the miracle to come. Second, she is pledged to be married to a man who is "a descendant of David." A Jewish betrothal involved two steps: a formal contract of engagement where the woman is legally considered to be the wife of the man, and then about a year later, an actual marriage ceremony after which the husband takes his wife home. From the moment of betrothal any child born to Mary is legally credited to Joseph and his lineage. Whether Joseph might be the genetic father of the child is of little importance to the Jewish mind, for an adopted child is accorded the same standing as any

other child he might have. Luke is setting the stage for the big news to come. He is showing that a son born to Mary during this time would fulfill the prophecies that the coming Messiah-King would be from the Davidic line and born of a virgin.

The LORD declares to you: The LORD Himself will make a house for you. When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. (2 Sam. 7:11b-14b)

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Luke wants us to ask ourselves, Is Mary that virgin? Will she be the one to bear the promised Messiah-King?

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28)

Mary's description as one who is "highly favored" tells us more about God than it does about Mary. The word here for "favor" is the same word for "grace" and "kindness." It suggests the giving of a gift and blessing. Mary is a wonderful young woman, but it must be made clear that God's kindness upon her springs solely from his grace, not from any inherent merit that she possesses. She is favored because she is the recipient of God's unmerited, freely bestowed, and graciously provided goodness.

God has chosen her for a very special privilege, and to underscore that point Gabriel assures her that "the Lord is with you." This is a refrain Mary would be familiar with, because this is what God has said over the years when he promises to be with his chosen people in extraordinary circumstances.

The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham." (Gen. 26:3)

Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." (Gen. 31:3)

Moses said to the Lord, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And God said, "I will be with you." (Exodus 3:11-12)

To Joshua before crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land the Lord said, "No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Josh. 1:5)

These words echo down through the ages and are given to Mary. Her ears are ringing with the promise that God will be with her every step of the way to accomplish what he will ask her to do. But what

is he asking of her? The angel tells Mary what the special work, the gift of grace, will be:

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:29-33)

To a bewildered Mary, Gabriel explains that she is favored because she will give birth to a son, and not just any son. She is to name him Jesus, same as the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “God is Savior.” He will be called by the royal title, “Son of the Most High,” and the “Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.”

Much of this language parallels the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel. Everything about the description of Jesus demonstrates clearly that he is the fulfillment of God’s promise to David of a son, a house, and an everlasting rule. The promise found its initial fulfillment in Solomon, the king who built the temple, however, the ultimate fulfillment is clearly realized in Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel’s hope. Jesus, like John, will be “great.” He will have a special role in God’s plan of salvation. But everything about Jesus is greater than John. John’s role is to prepare God’s people, while Jesus’ role is to deliver his people; John’s role is temporary, Jesus’ role is eternal. John is the prophet and forerunner, but Jesus is the promised Messiah-King.

Mary has been told about this wonderful child that she will bear, but not yet about the nature of how she will conceive him. She is a virgin, and so it is only natural that Mary asks the obvious question: “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). Unlike Zechariah who was unbelieving and looking for proof saying, “How can I be sure?” Mary does not doubt the announcement but is looking for information about the manner in which this conception will take place. “How does a virgin have a baby?” She simply and understandably wonders how a child can be conceived in her since she has never been with a man.

Gabriel graciously answers her question and reveals the mystery in these words.

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...” (Luke 1:35)

Gabriel answers Mary and tells her that her child will be conceived, not through sexual activity, but by direct divine involvement. She will be the recipient of a miracle. Mary need not fear for the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and “the power of the Most High” will overshadow her.

This image of God’s tender and protective presence is expressed beautifully in Psalm 91:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”...He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. (Psalm 91:1-2, 4)

The Lord will lovingly, gently, and faithfully protect her in this whole process. The mysterious and miraculous work of God within and around her ensures that the child born by her will be called the “Son of God.” We must remember that to Mary and the ears of the Jews at that time, the terms “*Son of the Most High*” and “*Son of God*” are not titles of deity but titles given to the king describing a special and intimate relationship with God.

There is some debate as to whether Mary understood the true nature of Jesus, but I believe it is clear from Mary’s reactions to Jesus in his early years that she did not understand the angel’s promise to be a declaration of Jesus’ deity. Her later hymn of praise to the Lord stresses, not Jesus’ deity, but his regal and delivering role as promised Messiah.

Luke chooses to present Jesus from the “earth up,” showing how, one step at a time, people came to see who Jesus really was. Unlike John’s Gospel, Luke does not mention Jesus’ preexistence as the Word who was with God in the beginning then becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:1-2, 14). Luke starts with Jesus as the promised king who reveals himself as Lord in the context of his ministry. The full implications of the titles “Son of the Most High” and “Son of God” will not be realized for some time. Only slowly do people grasp who he truly is and all of what is promised.

Luke will spend much of the rest of his Gospel flushing out the ultimate meaning of these titles and their fulfillment in Jesus, but for now they demonstrate to Mary very clearly that Jesus will be the long-awaited Messiah-King promised to her people Israel.

This must have been an astounding and overwhelming promise for Mary. Though it was a lot to take in, she did not ask for a sign but Gabriel graciously gives her one.

“...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. For nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:36-37).

Gabriel shares with Mary that Elizabeth, her aging and long-barren relative, has conceived and is in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Rest assured Mary, God is able to accomplish these miraculous births, since “nothing is impossible with God.” The word “nothing” is literally “no word,” so some translations read, “no word from God will ever fail.” Not a single word of all God’s words, of all God’s promises, will ever fail.

Assured of God’s kind grace, protective presence, and sovereign power Mary responds with words that have echoed down through the ages:

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.”(Luke 1:38).

There is so much for us to learn from Mary. Notice her humility. Mary identifies herself as the “Lord’s servant,” and as such she humbly accepts and submits to his will. I’m sure this is not the way Mary would have dreamed up her life. Her way would have been to get married to the respectable Joseph and then enjoy all the blessings of motherhood. This is obviously God’s plan, not her plan, but she doesn’t haggle with Gabriel. She doesn’t say, “OK I’ll do it, but how about if we wait a few months and do this whole miraculous virgin birth thing after I get married?”

Notice her courage. She is ready to submit to God though it may cost her everything she holds dear. As a betrothed, pregnant teen, her reputation, her marriage, and her very future were all at risk. She did not know how Joseph would respond, or how her own family

or tight-knit community would react. Gossip, divorce, even stoning were all a possible price she could pay. She risks everything in her obedience.

Notice Mary's faith: Does she fully understand what she is giving herself to? How could she? This has never been done before. Her faith is not placed in a process that she can fully comprehend, but in her Master and Lord in whom she can trust completely. She is willing to enter into the mystery of God's plan. Mary takes God at his word, and places herself in his hands.

After hearing this remarkable response of humble and courageous faith from Mary, the angel knows his work is done and so he leaves just as quickly and mysteriously as he came.

The overriding purpose of this text, given by Luke, is to demonstrate that the Lord has remembered his people Israel and in Jesus he has fulfilled his promises and provided for their deliverance and salvation.

In revealing this central truth, we can't help but reflect on the way the Lord continues to use his humble servants to carry out his good work. In many ways Mary's opportunity is our opportunity. The message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, comes to us as well. We too are invited by God to put our faith in him and enter into the privilege of being used for his saving purposes. We have been given his grace. We have been called into his service. We have been given his presence. Does this seem too far-fetched to you? Too out of reach for you? Let me remind you of the words of Jesus after an encounter with a rich young ruler unwilling to let go of his wealth to follow him.

Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With human beings this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:24b-27)

Is there someone in your life, including yourself, about whom you have given up hope or stopped praying for because you no longer truly believe that spiritual life will ever spark there? Our text today reminds us that our creator God is capable of creating life anywhere at any time. He is at work shaping history, bringing new life into people and places no one had thought possible.

At our staff meeting this past Wednesday we had the joy and privilege of hearing two brothers, one from Syria and the other from Lebanon, share about the Lord's ongoing work of salvation in the violent and turbulent Middle East. I remember one story in particular about a young Muslim man attending the finest university in Egypt. While studying to be an imam he was befriended by Christians who loved him, shared the word of God with him, and led him to Christ. He was baptized and is now leading a vibrant Christian ministry in the heart of the Muslim world. His story is a powerful example of how our Heavenly Father is able to do far beyond what we can even imagine. No one is beyond his reach. Are you struggling with feeling unloved by God? Are you wondering if God's favor could ever be upon you? The answer is an unqualified yes; he does love you and has given you his grace. God has sent someone greater than an angel; he has sent his one and only Son for you. He will not force himself upon you, but will offer himself to you. For those who believe in him, the presence of God is more than "with" you, he is "in" you by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17)

The life of Christ is birthed within us by the presence of the Holy Spirit given to dwell within us. In and through Jesus Christ we are able to receive freely the special favor of God. Like Mary, we receive God's freely bestowed grace, not due to anything we have done to deserve it, but on the sole basis of his kind initiative. As the Apostle Paul said,

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:4-5a, 8).

During this Christmastime when we are saturated with the idea of gift giving and gift-receiving, we must never forget that God's gift of his Son to us is the greatest gift of all. It is a gift that none of us are worthy to receive, but the good news is that there is no obstacle too great for our Heavenly Father to carry out his mission to save us, and the world, to himself. His love is a fierce and majestic love.

Brennan Manning expresses this beautifully:

Imagine a stormy day at sea, your ship yielding to a relentless wind, pummeled by crashing waves, subject to the awesome force of nature. A force that is both fierce and majestic. A power that is nothing short of furious. Such is God's intense, consuming love for His children. It's a love that knows no limits, and no boundaries. A love that will go to any lengths, and take any risks, to pursue us.¹

The Lord God has invited us, and invites us each day to receive and take hold of his love and life and to share that love and life with those around us at all times and in all places. This is our mission and our vocation, and we must remember that God does not call us to a task he will not prepare us for and enable us to perform. No matter what troubles you, or swirls around and within you, you can have a deep, abiding, and eternal peace. The Apostle Paul tells us that, "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). As the prophet Isaiah foretold Jesus is our "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

It is my prayer that all of us will grab onto that Peace, and that we may continue to grow in our faith so that when given the opportunity we too may say "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said, for nothing is impossible with God."

1. Brennan Manning, *The Furious Longing of God*, Published by David C. Cook; Colorado Springs, CO; 2009; back cover.

