

## Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month,<sup>1</sup> the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth<sup>2</sup> 27 to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, from the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.<sup>3</sup> 28 And he came to her saying, "Rejoice, favored one!"<sup>4</sup> The Lord is with you."<sup>5</sup> 29 But she was deeply

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<sup>1</sup>The "sixth month" at the beginning of this passage refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, connecting this passage with the one that directly precedes it. In doing so, Luke informs us that what we hear in the parallel announcement stories function together within the one purpose of God Almighty. "Behind both chains of events thus set in motion, stands God, present via his messenger and the unveiling of his aim (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1997), 84)." That is to say, it is not a mere coincidence that God has visited Zechariah with a promise of a son and now comes to Mary promising the coming of the Lord. Yet, we should not assume that these are parallel stories that stand on an equal footing. For example, "the first announcement came as an answer to fervent prayer; the second was completely unanticipated. John would be born to parents past the ages of child bearing, but the miracle of Jesus' birth would be even greater. Jesus would be born to a virgin. The announcement of Jesus' future role also shows that at every point Jesus would be even greater than his forerunner (R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel According to Luke" *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 50)."

<sup>2</sup> As Christians who have read the Gospels, we take Nazareth for granted because we hear about it so much within the Gospels. In reality, Nazareth was the "armpit of the universe" for lack of a better phrase. Nowhere within the Old Testament is the town mentioned nor does it have any real notoriety following the birth of Jesus within his ministry. Located in Galilee, Nazareth was 15 miles from the Sea of Galilee and 20 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. A small village located within a valley or basin, it had a moderate climate that provided for vegetation. Nevertheless, as small villages go, this was one of the least known. As Nathanael remarks in John 1:45 in response to Andrew, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" As small villages go, it was insignificant. If we were to pretend that we had never heard the gospel of Luke before, but were very familiar with the stories in the Old Testament, we would be shocked to discover that God's glory will be known in such an insignificant place.

<sup>3</sup> The announcement from the angel Gabriel to Mary reads like many of the announcements/births in the Old Testament. This announcement is similar to the birth of Ishmael (Genesis 16:7-13), Isaac (Genesis 17:1-21; 18:1-15), and Samson (Judges 13:3-20) as well as the announcement/birth of John the Baptist. "In this way, Luke places the birth of Jesus into the context of a series of interventions by God into human history by way of wondrous births and into the context of the promises to Israel (Lewis R. Donelson, "Luke 1:26-38: Exegetical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word*, vol. 1 (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008), 93)." But the fulfilled promise that is the birth of Jesus is more than an intervention into human history; rather, the incarnation and birth of Jesus is the penetration of God into the midst of human history to heal the divide between humanity and God from within as one who is both fully human and fully God. In proclaiming the promise of God's purpose to Mary through the angel Gabriel, he takes a different route than was expected.

Whereas Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the temple, in that one particular location within the Israelite faith that was deemed the holiest, Gabriel goes to the far country to meet Mary. In going to Nazareth, Gabriel's announcement to Mary emphasizes the sheer ordinariness of this woman. Moreover, the meeting of Mary and Gabriel is not by chance; rather, "the key Christological claims of this passage are anticipated in the way Mary and Joseph are identified. Joseph is of the house of David. This lineage is crucial for Jesus' messianic and kingly status (Donelson, 95)." God comes to humanity as the messiah and king through the most unlikely path.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel's opening greeting to Mary signals the special character involved with the good news he brings. In most translations we read "greetings" or "hail," but this fails to grasp the profound depth of Gabriel's words. A better translation is the one offered above: rejoice!

confused because of his words and considered what sort of greeting this might be.<sup>6</sup> 30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor (literally grace) with God. 31 Look, you will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus."<sup>7</sup> 32 He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,<sup>8</sup> 33 he will rule over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end."<sup>9</sup> 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be,

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One interesting feature of the Greek that we miss in English is the alliteration that occurs in Gabriel's greeting. The words for "rejoice" and "favored" share a similar root centered in the word for grace/joy. In this way, Gabriel calls Mary to rejoice or be joyful, for she is favored or graced by God in a distinctive way. In calling Mary "favored one" Gabriel renames her in accordance with God's purpose and the fulfillment of God's promises. That is one of the most interesting features of this passage.

For all intents and purposes, Mary, a teenager between the ages of 12-15, has no illustrious background. We are given no reason why Gabriel encounters her. Mary does not come from a wealthy family nor does she live in a town of any reputation. Mary is entirely ordinary; yet she is declared "favored one" by Gabriel. As Protestants, do we have a place for Mary within our thinking; not a place of worship but at least a place of respect? Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters refer to her as the "theotokos," quite literally the "God-bearer." "God has given his favor to one who had no claim to worthy status, raised her up from a position of lowliness, and has chosen her to have a central role in salvation history (Joel Green, 87)." We take these stories for granted and in doing so we miss the earth-shaking, kingdom-of-God-anticipating Good News of great joy: through an ordinary woman living in an ordinary place, God does something extraordinary.

<sup>5</sup> By saying, "the Lord is with you," Gabriel uses language reminiscent of many Old Testament references to those whom the Lord calls and chooses. In particular, this phrase is meant as an assurance to those "chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history; in such contexts this phrase assures human agents of divine resources and protection (Green, 87)."

<sup>6</sup> Mary is visibly shaken by the appearance of Gabriel. Not only is this due to the surprise she receives when Gabriel appears, but it may also be due to a cultural phenomenon that existed within Jewish circles at that time. As Culpepper notes, "Tobit, a popular folk tale included in the apocrypha, tells of a jealous angel who appeared on a bride's wedding night each time she married and killed her bridegroom. Against the backdrop of this popular story, the fear of a betrothed girl at the appearance of an angel is all the more understandable. Could it be that she thought an evil spirit was threatening to prevent her marriage (Culpepper, 51)?" Whether or not this is really the case, we cannot overlook the genuine fear and confusion Mary felt.

<sup>7</sup> As was the case with John, note that God names the child rather than Mary or Joseph. We learn that this child will be named Jesus whose name literally means "Yahweh saves." There can be no misinterpretation concerning this birth. Something incredible is happening. Within the life of this child, who will be born to Mary, God will be present to save his people from the consequences of their sin. Throughout this story, it is God alone who takes the initiative in this birth and it is God alone who will bring it to completion in the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup> This fulfills the promise of 2 Samuel 7:11-16.

<sup>9</sup> While the king was often called the "son of God," this title is applied to Jesus even before his birth because he is the Son of the Most High and his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom. While those in Israel have awaited the return of a great Davidic king and messiah who will rule; God goes beyond this expectation to concretely install his Son, Jesus, as king, messiah, and the one whose kingdom shall have no end. Yet, let it be understood that Jesus isn't called Son of God by virtue of his birth into the house of David. Rather, Jesus is Son because of his relationship to the Father made known in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

since I've never been with a man?"<sup>10</sup> 35 But the angel replied, saying to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the child to be born to you will be called holy, the Son of God. 36 And see, Elizabeth, your relative has become pregnant with a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible with God."<sup>12</sup> 38 Mary said, "Here am I, the slave (often translated servant) of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."<sup>13</sup> Then the angel departed from her.

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<sup>10</sup> Three times reference is made to Mary's virginity. This highlights the reality that Mary and Joseph have not yet consummated their marriage; thus Mary raises a poignant question concerning logistics: no sex=no baby.

Within the Jewish tradition, marriages were arranged between a young man and woman so that the woman would be betrothed to her husband-to-be. At a given time the marriage is solidified and for all intents and purposes a couple is married. While technically married, the woman continues to live with her family for one year. After that year there is another ceremony that solidifies the marriage. It is in this way that Mary has never "known" a man. What should be lifted up within this passage is the fact that her virginity is not presented as a problem or an obstacle; rather it bears witness to the work of new creation that God is undertaking through her womb. Mary's question to Gabriel undergirds the reality that God can still surprise us now and then.

<sup>11</sup> Recall Genesis 1:1-2, "In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, with darkness over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God swept over the waters." The same Spirit who was involved in the creation of the world is none other than the Spirit involved in the womb of Mary. God is doing a new act of creation within her womb: the incarnation!

Luke's concern in telling the story has nothing to do with the biological details involved with this conception. He doesn't really care how a virgin can conceive a child without engaging in intercourse. Rather, Luke casts this promise in the holiest of mysteries, evoking a sense of the sheer awesome power of God to do a new thing in the midst of the world to fulfill God's purposes therein.

<sup>12</sup> Even within the announcement to Mary, we find the declaration of God's sovereign glory. Nothing will be impossible for the Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. This is the God who called forth life through his Word; who raised up prophets and kings, who delivered his people from the land of Egypt. This is the Lord God who will bring life forth from nothing, sending his only-begotten Son into the midst of sinful flesh to heal that flesh, to be one with humanity, and to offer up from within humanity the perfect obedience and faithfulness that only God can provide. This is the impossible that God transforms out of the freedom of his love and power in, through, and as Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Zechariah, Mary accepts the divine pronouncement, equating herself as a slave of God. In doing so, she truly will be forced to forsake all family relations; for through her participation in the will of God, she transcends all claims of family. But there is more to it than that.

Mary's reply to Gabriel rings through with echoes from other "call" stories throughout the biblical narrative of God's salvation. When God calls Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah, the proper response to God's call is "Here I am." In response to the call and claim of God over her life, Mary places herself before the Lord in a position of servitude; acknowledging her role in God's purpose of salvation—even salvation for herself. As a slave of the Lord, Mary has been raised from obscurity, raised from a position of poor and low status in the world to one that is divinely given. In response to God's renaming of her as favored one, Mary lives into the responsibility that comes with the title to bear forth the Lord and Savior to be conceived in her womb.