

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. [28] And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [29] But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. [30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. [31] And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. [32] 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 ancestor David. [33] He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." [34] Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" [35] The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. [36] And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God." [38] Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

SILAS MARNER

Do you remember George Elliot's book, Silas Marner?

I was required to read that book in high school. I suspect some of you had that same assignment.

The story is about this reclusive hardened man named Silas Marner. Silas thinks God has been unfair to him because of some trouble he had encountered in another town, and so he now seeks to block out the world around him. He is dedicated only to his job and the accumulation of gold. The gold he hides under his bed under some bricks. But one day he comes

home to find that the gold is gone. Some thief stole the treasure of his life, and he is beside himself in grief.

Every day he would return to his home, unrealistically hoping that the thief would have a change of heart and bring the gold back. He couldn't believe that God would treat him so badly a second time. But, one day as he comes home looking for his gold, it seemed that his prayers had been answered. He saw a glint of light on the floor. His heart leapt for joy. Had his gold been returned?

But, when he stretched out his hand he found, instead of hard coin, soft curls on his floor. It was a sleeping child.

Elliot wrote,

“He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far off life. It stirred old quiverings of tenderness ... old impressions of awe of some power presiding over his life ... [We] older human beings, with our inward turmoil, feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky.”

Elliot made a good point in his novel. People can be transformed by the appearance of a child. It is amazing how something so small and helpless can change everything about our lives. Many of you know it's true. The birth of a child is a great treasure and a great responsibility. It is the beginning of a relationship that will last a lifetime.

A SPECIAL CHILD

Perhaps that is why God chose to come among us as a child. There is wonder and mystery at every birth but even more so at the birth of Jesus. I like the way the Apostle Paul describes the incarnation. He said that Jesus though he was God “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness ...”

In other words, God in Christ voluntarily gave up power.

Jesus is not just any child. Jesus is the Son of the Most High. Jesus is God incarnate. In Jesus the God who stands outside of time enters time. In Jesus the God who is infinite becomes finite. In the Jesus the God who is all powerful becomes all vulnerable. The God whose womb bore the universe is now born of Mary's womb.

What strange treasure is this?

Like Silas Marner we hardly know what to make of it, but in the presence of this child we are filled with awe. Could God really come to us in such a way?

We are accustomed to thinking big in our world. Bigger is better. Bigger is stronger. But, if you want to understand the God who is revealed to us in Jesus, we have to learn to think small.

Heavenly treasure comes to us in flesh and blood.

HOW CAN THIS BE?

If we can really hear the message, our response will probably not be all that different from Mary's when the angel first gave her the news. How can this be? It's impossible. Who will believe this? And on one level this does not seem like good news at all. This is very troubling news.

We can understand why Mary was troubled. The birth of the child to a virgin was unprecedented, a one of a kind happening. No one would believe such a thing, including Joseph to whom Mary was engaged!

Of all the doctrines of the church, "born of the virgin Mary" is the one that gives more people trouble. It makes God look too small, and it makes human beings look too large.

You say that God became one of us? Preposterous, we reply.

And yet, that is exactly what the Scripture for today tells us. The treasure of the universe came in the form of a baby born to a young girl named Mary. Nothing like this had happened before. Nothing this has happened since. It is a totally unique event on the stage of history.

And it is basic to our Christian faith.

When we say in the Creed each week that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, we are not just affirming an ancient miracle. We are claiming more, much more. We are saying that God was in Christ. In Jesus humanity is elevated and divinity is lowered. In Jesus we see the true, best face of humanity. And in Jesus we also see the human face of God.

God is different from how many have imagined. Instead of overwhelming us with His might, God comes to live among us in weakness. Instead of bringing us to our knees with His power God shows us the power of love. It is a love that begins with the birth of a baby to a frightened teen-age girl in very humble circumstances.

The message of this ancient story is this: if God is present in the life of this little girl in a no good out of the way place like Nazareth, God is present everywhere.

God is not a stranger to our world. God is with us with us always, and God is with us in a unique way in this child that Mary will bear.

JESUS, A CHILD OF PROMISE

He is God's child, and He comes into the world already named. The angel told Mary, "His name will be Jesus."

The name Jesus is the Old Testament name Joshua. It means savior. As Joshua of old delivered God's people from their enemies and brought them into the land of promise, so Jesus would save his people. But, unlike his namesake, Joshua or Israel's greatest king, King David, Jesus' reign would last forever and his deliverance would be a greater deliverance, a deliverance from sin. (Matthew 1:21)

The manner of Jesus' birth emphasizes his unique role in the salvation of God's people. You may remember that in the Bible quite often an unexpected birth foreshadowed the working of God in a new way.

For example, God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. However, God didn't make good on that promise until Sarah was well beyond the age of child-bearing. As one commentator put it, "She had one foot in the nursing home and the other foot in the maternity ward." But, God delivered on His promise as a sign of His faithfulness. God did the impossible to make sure Abraham and Sarah remembered that this child was a special child, a child of promise.

We see this same theme continuing throughout the Bible, right up to the conception of John the Baptist to Elizabeth in the passage that precedes our passage for today. We hear echoes of the story of Abraham and Sarah when the Bible tells us that Elizabeth was barren and both she and Zechariah were "getting on in years."

But, the angel Gabriel told this old couple that God was about to do something new. They were going to have a child in their old age and this child would be special. He would prepare the way for the coming of God's Messiah.

Zechariah was not so sure about this announcement. He hadn't seen any old women delivering babies in his day. He thought it was impossible. And so the angel gave him a sign, the sign of making him unable to speak until Elizabeth would bear this miracle child!

In our story for today, the angel uses this first unlikely pregnancy as a way to help Mary understand something even more miraculous. When Mary asks, "How can this be?" The angel points to her relative Elizabeth's pregnancy as a sign that God is going to do something even more miraculous in her life. If, by the power of God, Elizabeth can have a child in her old age, perhaps God could do even more through Mary.

After all, what are the limits of a God who created the heavens and the earth? Is anything too hard for God? Is anything impossible with God?

This is the question all of us must ask and answer whenever God calls us to be a part of his Divine plan.

I guess, in a way, we could rightly say that Mary's role was greater than anything we could ever be called to do. She was the Christ bearer, the mother of God. No wonder the veneration of Mary has played such a large role in some churches.

GOD'S STRANGE BLESSING

And yet, I think we do Mary a disservice by changing her into an icon, yet another example of "otherworldly" devotion and power. She was what the Bible says she was, a frightened little girl who was overshadowed by the power of the Almighty.

Yes, the Bible tells us that Mary had been chosen, "favored" by God. But it was a strange blessing. It brought with it none of the benefits for which many of us strive daily. Today many assume that those whom God favors will enjoy the things we equate with a good life: social standing, wealth, and good health.

Yet Mary, God's favored one, was "blessed" with having a child out of wedlock who would later be executed as a criminal. Acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God's blessing. In fact, you might say that her life was totally messed up by this visit from God's messenger.

That seems to be the case whenever God's messenger visits with anyone. Ask Jesus' disciples what the call of God in Christ can do to your lifestyle. Take Matthew for instance. One day you're happily collecting taxes, and the next day you're leaving that good paying job to follow Jesus through the countryside. Ask James and John. One

minute you're fishing with your family and the next minute you've dropped your nets and are going wherever Jesus leads.

The Bible doesn't say why they were able to leave their job at the spur of the moment, but I think it may have been because they saw in Jesus the birth of God's presence into their own lives. The possibilities were expanded by the call of Jesus. They didn't know how or why. All they knew was they had been called by name, and for some reason that was enough.

And this story has continued right down to the present day. The Divine messenger still comes into our lives and confronts us with the same challenge. God has a plan for your life. It's totally different from what you would ever want or even imagine. You are you blessed! Now, get ready to move to some place you don't want to go!

THE CHRIST BEARERS

Most of us don't feel so blessed to have our life disrupted in this way. And most of us find ourselves asking the same questions that must have been on the mind of Mary long ago. "Are you sure you've got the right person? Can God really work through me? Can God really create something important out of my small life? Can I dare to believe that there is a purpose for my life that goes beyond what I can imagine?"

You see, according to the Bible, Mary was not the only one called to be the Christ bearer. Every disciple is called to do the same thing. Every disciple is called to give birth to the reality of God's presence in our world. As God called Mary long ago, God is calling you today. As the Apostle Paul put it, we are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of that body. (I Corinthians 12:28)

Can you believe it? Is it possible that the very presence of God can be born through you? Is it possible that the Spirit of the Most High can overshadow you in such a way that the world can be blessed?

It's always fascinated me that God chose to work his will through two women that were on the opposite ends of the age spectrum. Mary was barely into her teens and Elizabeth was too old to have children.

And yet God choose these women to be the bearers of hope for generations to come. Perhaps God was saying, "You're never too young or too old to have hope. The God of the impossible is coming into your life today."

Mary doesn't have much to say about what happens in her life. An angel shows up on her doorstep and tells her she is favored, that she will be having God's Son.

But, Mary is an example of piety in one important way. She accepts God's surprising will for her life. She believes that it is possible for God to work through her and so she aligns her will with God's will.

She said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

SAYING "YES" TO GOD

This is a very significant thing that Mary does. The Bible is filled with stories of people who spent their whole life struggling against God's purpose, unable to make the simple commitment that Mary made this day.

I guess the best example is the Old Testament figure of Jacob. Jacob was God's chosen one. But, no matter how much God promised Jacob, Jacob always struggled to get just a bit more or do it his way. The story of Jacob struggling with the will of God is quite often our story.

Like the child who doesn't want to obey a parent completely we are always saying, "Yes, Lord but ..." (And then comes the excuse telling why we can't do something.) There is always some "if, and or but" in our lives, some condition that attempts to keep the will of God at arm's length.

That's where Mary was different. And that's how Mary is an example for us to follow.

There was no "yes but" when Mary heard and understood God's will for her life. She simply said "yes." Yes, Lord let me be your servant. Let your presence come into the world through me. And, at that moment, this little frightened girl became a beacon of hope to people down through the ages. Through the example of Mary we see that it is possible to say "yes" to the Lord. It is possible for the Divine to be a part of a seemingly insignificant life.

And don't you see that if it happens once, it can happen again. When Mary said "yes" to God's will, the world was changed forever. Human beings were an integral part of the Divine will and story. No longer could we look at any human being as insignificant or unwanted. God was in Jesus, this baby born to Mary, and it set off a chain of events that are still reverberating throughout the world.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that your life is bound up in the life of the Divine? Do you believe that your willingness to submit yourself to the Divine Plan is still just as important today as it was when Mary said "yes" to God long ago? Do you believe that you are never too young and never too old to be a part of that Plan?

That's the question posed to us today by this ancient story from God's Word. When we confess our belief in the Virgin Birth, it is not just about what happened to Mary then and there and long ago. It's also about what happens here and now. If we believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, then we believe that Jesus is born into our lives as well.

SAM'S STORY

A seminary professor had his students tell why they felt called into the ministry. His favorite call story was by a student who wrote that during his teenage years, "I was the teenager from hell." He made his parents' lives

utterly miserable. He was so irresponsible in college that he flunked out and spent a couple of years working.

While working, he met a woman and married. They began attending a little church. Gradually, he came to the surprising awareness that God seemed to be calling him, calling him into the Christian ministry. So he went back to college.

He dreaded telling his parents, after all they had been through, that now his life was taking this unexpected turn. But he told them the story of the surprising turn of events, the way that, though his life had been a series of mistakes and irresponsible actions, he now believed that God wanted him to become a pastor.

Suddenly, his mother burst into tears, saying,
“I’m so ashamed! I can’t believe this has happened!”

The young man was shocked by her response. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I can’t believe this has happened,” she said.

“Didn’t I tell you that before you were born I had had a couple of miscarriages? I didn’t think we would ever have a child. So I made God a promise.

If he would let me have a baby boy that I could bring to term, I would name him Samuel and I would dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament.”

Sam heard all of this with great astonishment.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” he asked. “You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble if you would have told me about this.”

“We’re Presbyterians,” the mother replied. “How was I to know something like this would work? I didn’t even know that we even believed in this kind of thing.”

If you think that the story of Mary being called by the angel Gabriel is strange, think again. Stories about God's call tend to be strange and a lot more common than you may think.

They are not strange because God sends an angel to call someone, though sometimes God does. Call stories are strange because of whom Jesus chooses to call. He calls ordinary people like you and me.

Like Mary, we think of all of the reasons why this doesn't make any sense. We are not perfect people. We have baggage. We have limitations. Nevertheless, in our better moments, when the call comes, we, like Mary, simply say "Yes."

In fact, this appears to be the primary way God changes the world. God calls ordinary people to be overshadowed by a greater power and that makes the ordinary extraordinary.

God changes the course of history, not through earthquake, wind and fire. God changes the course of history but through ordinary people like Mary.

Let us follow Mary's example.
Let us simply say "yes" to that call.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN