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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 21, 2014

Text: Luke 1:26–38

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Mary, angels, and mangers are often seen on Christmas cards, at least, those cards which express the joy and hope of Christianity. For some reason, they don't seem all that frightening; they don't seem to challenge us very deeply. John the Baptist by contrast, who has received our attention the past couple of Sundays, makes us very uncomfortable. He's just strange: coarse clothing (camel's hair & leather belts), bizarre diet (locusts & wild honey), inhospitable lodging (Judean desert), and uncompromising preaching (O brood of vipers, who warned you from the wrath to come, he once thundered at the Pharisees & Sadducees).

But Mary, as she's seen in today's Gospel reading(s) from Luke, should cause us to wonder and seek to serve the Lord in faith and devotion all the more fervently. Mary should challenge us as much or maybe even more than John the Baptist. To be sure, she doesn't frighten us with her outward appearance like John would; tradition says she was probably 16-18 years old when the angel Gabriel visited her. And her humble hometown – Nazareth, a mere military outpost in the no-nothing northern region of Galilee – might cause us to think her ignorant, backward, unsophisticated, unworthy of history's notice. All these presumptions are mistaken. She's a startling saint of God. I defy anyone to come up with another whose life changed the world more than Mary's; the Lord Jesus, Mary's Son, being the easiest and greatest exception to that challenge.

Mary is introduced to us in a very specific historic context and situation. Luke begins, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary" (vs. 26–27). The phrase "in the sixth month" refers to Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. You see, John and Jesus, Mary and Elizabeth are bound together in time and history. Each of their life stories doesn't make any sense without the others.

Elizabeth was married to the pious priest Zechariah. Both were well advanced in age, says Luke in the verse preceding today's reading(s). And they were childless. Elizabeth had never borne a child; and it seemed she never would...until Gabriel told her that she would give birth to the forerunner of the Messiah.

John the Baptist's birth was a miracle, in the truest sense! Zechariah and Elizabeth were old enough to be grandparents, possibly great grandparents. And here they are having their firstborn announced by an archangel of God.

Six months into that miraculous pregnancy, Gabriel visits Mary, Elizabeth's cousin. On the surface she is quite ordinary. She has royal blood for she is of the house of King David. But that noble house had come down in circumstances over the past few centuries. The most remarkable thing that she could claim up to this point in her life was that she's engaged to Joseph, a good and pious man also of the house of David. Planning for a wedding is a remarkable thing; a life changing event if there ever was one. But millions of young women have planned their weddings. In that regard, Mary's wedding was nothing extraordinary.

An ordinary girl, making typical wedding plans, in a less than ordinary village...until Gabriel, an archangel of God appears, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (vs. 28). It's a wonderful and polite introduction but Mary is frightened! That's one place where modern, mass marketing has done us a great disservice. We've been inundated with angels portrayed as cute, non-threatening, cuddly infants or youths rather than the powerful, majestic spiritual beings the Bible says they are. In the Bible, people are terrified in the presence of angels. The same is true for Mary.

And Gabriel sees this. "Do not be afraid, Mary," he says, "for you have found favor with God" (vs. 30). Mary has quite literally been graced by God; she's a recipient of undeserved, divine favor. That's what makes Mary all the more amazing and challenging. If she were some kind of super-saint we'd naturally conclude that it made sense that God chose her. She deserved to be the mother of God's Son because of her remarkable holiness, or supernatural knowledge, or extreme selflessness, or ... whatever. But that's not the case. There's nothing in her that compels or forces God to choose her. Otherwise, it wouldn't be undeserved grace and favor.

Mary's story is one of pure grace. And guess what? Your story is one of divine grace too! God created you not because He had to but because He wanted to bestow His love and mercy upon you. Jesus, God's Son, saved you by becoming your perfect

sacrifice because of His love for you and His desire to save you from a horrific eternity. The Holy Spirit keeps you in the one true, saving faith because He desires to bring you to your glorious inheritance in heaven, In other words, your whole life story from conception to natural death then resurrection unto eternal life on the Last Day is one miraculous work of God's love and grace. Greetings, O favored ones, the Lord is with you all!!

Mary challenges us because she is like us in so many ways. And we are called to exemplify her faith and obedience, for she heard most remarkable things and believed God's Word and promise.

Listen again to Gabriel's message to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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 David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (vs. 30–33).

This amazing message is incredible in any number of different ways. Don't be afraid Mary but you're going to gift birth to God's Son. Oh, that's to be concerned about, I guess. The ancient promise given to King David a 1,000 years earlier, that his house and kingdom would last forever, as we heard in today's OT reading, will be fulfilled in my Son? Piece of cake. Are you kidding me? If this isn't earth shattering than I don't know what will create awe and wonder.

But notice how Mary responds. She asks a question, not from doubt but from a sincere desire to know. Vs. 34, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Mary didn't have the advantage of knowing about molecular biology and genetics but she knew what everyone knows...virgin females don't give birth to babies.

But you will, Mary. How? Through the Holy Spirit. And just so you don't misunderstand the importance of the Holy Spirit's role in all this, Gabriel adds, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you...therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (vs. 35). Gabriel has now said twice that Mary's Son is God's Son; true God and true Man in one person. The writer to the Hebrews (3rd reading, ch. 10) exults in the fact that God's eternal Son, the 2nd person of the Trinity, takes on human flesh and blood for the purpose of sanctifying us unto eternal life. God's Son receives His human body in Mary's virgin womb through the conception of the Holy Spirit.

Mary challenges us and our natural sense of skepticism. She challenges our sense of what we know about biology and the natural world. She challenges our humanistic reasoning and wisdom. She challenges our preconceived notions on how God should go about being God. For she tells us, through her faith and obedience, that God is bigger and more glorious than anything we can imagine. Mary actually believes that “nothing will be impossible with God” (vs. 37). And that dear saints of God, is what Christmas is about, God doing the impossible, graciously and lovingly for the salvation of His people.

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (vs. 38). And there’s the glorious mystery and wonder of Christmas expressed in humble faith. God becomes man; the God who cannot be contained in all heaven and earth takes up residence in His mother’s womb; the Creator becomes a helpless creature protected by a teenage mother. That’s the task given to Mary and she says “Yes, let it be so.”

Now some of you might be wondering...isn't this a youth Christmas service? Why didn't our youth read about angels and shepherds, world-wide taxation and animals in mangers, or Mary giving birth? We'll hear those glorious things later this week. But today, I wanted our youth in lead us in celebrating when God become man. Christmas Day is the annual commemoration of Jesus' birth. But God's Son didn't take on human flesh and blood on the day of His birth but at the moment Mary said, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Mary believed God's Word and God's Son was conceived in her womb. God became man then! Nine months later, Mary journeyed to Bethlehem with Joseph her husband and gave birth to her divine Son in a manger. But it all began with an ordinary girl who received God's extraordinary grace.

Christmas is your story. God's Son declares of you, “You are my child, redeemed from a world of sin and shame. Don't be afraid. Your life finds its dignity, purpose, and meaning in Me and my love.” May your Christmas be filled with you and happiness, but most especially with faith the faith that says, “Let it be to me according to you word.”

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.