

“Mary’s Faith,” Luke 1:26-38 (Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018)

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸ And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

PRAY

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the time of year where we celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas and anticipate the second coming of Jesus at his return. Our text for this morning is the annunciation – when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus.

From this text there is a lot we can learn not only about Christmas but about the Christian faith itself and what it actually looks like to follow Jesus. We’ll look at these verses under two headings: first, Gabriel’s announcement. Second, Mary’s response.

First, Gabriel’s announcement. Gabriel comes to Mary and says that, even though she is a virgin (that’s very clear from verses 27 and 34) she will soon find herself pregnant with a child.

For about 150 years there have been those in certain corners of Christianity that have been embarrassed by this claim. They’ve said the church needs to jettison the doctrine of the virgin birth. Modern people, they’ve argued, simply won’t believe that kind of thing anymore because we know how science works. People in the first century were primitive and ignorant and didn’t understand the facts of life, so they would just accept any claim of a pregnant virgin, but now if you’ve been to high school and had basic biology you know this isn’t possible.

Actually, the reverse is true. In Matthew’s gospel we’re told that when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he immediately resolved to “divorce her quietly.”

Note that Joseph didn't say, "Mary, you're pregnant? Well, that happens. Maybe it was something you ate." No, Joseph resolved to divorce her quietly precisely because he knew, like everyone else in ancient Israel knew, how babies were made. Joseph was not ignorant. He knew Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't involved in it. He refused to go through with the marriage, for he had too much integrity to act like nothing had happened.

If anything, with the technology we have available to us today - IVF, for example - we are far more likely to believe a virgin could be with child than anyone in the first century would have. There's an entire television series, *Jane the Virgin*, devoted to just such a premise.

Mary, though a virgin, was with child, and there's no reason to be embarrassed by it. If there is a God in the universe, then it makes sense he could cause a woman to conceive without sex as easily as a doctor at a fertility clinic can today.

And the child to be born to her is not just any child. "And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God.'" Luke 1:35. Literally, what is said there is "the child to be born is holy."

This child is Jesus Christ and, before he is ever born, he *is declared holy*. In other words, *he's declared to be God*. In Jesus Christ, the eternal, immortal, invisible, almighty, God of the universe became an embryo in the womb of an unwed, teenage mother. Jesus is fully God yet also fully baby.

What is the significance of Gabriel's announcement? Two things: *first, Gabriel's announcement shows us in a powerful way that God is love.*

God became a baby. Now, is there any creature on the planet less threatening, and more dependent on love, than a human baby? If you were walking early one morning around Lake Patsy in Lamar Park and heard just about any creature lying in the weeds and making noises, you'd be very careful. If you heard a snake hiss or rattle, your heart would race and you'd immediately go into fight or flight mode. Same thing if you heard a dog growling from the reeds. If you heard a man's voice cry out, "Hey, help me," you'd still be really careful, because what's a man doing lying by the lake at 6 in the morning?

But if you were walking around Lake Patsy and heard a baby cry, you'd have a completely different response. You'd run, find the baby, pick him up and comfort him. You wouldn't be scared at all. Why? Because nothing is more helpless than a baby.

God became a baby. What can that tell you? Some of you when you think of God think of someone who is remote at best or, at worst, you think of someone who primarily is angry with you and who is just waiting for you to mess up so he can bring the hammer down on you. But friends if that's you then *you're not paying attention at Christmas.*

God became a baby. Is God holy? Yes. Is God someone who demands justice? Yes. Will God punish sins? Absolutely. *But if that's all God is, then why in the world would he become a*

baby? Why would he become the weakest possible creature on the planet, a creature that will die if other humans don't love it? I'll tell you – he wouldn't. God could save himself a trip if all he wanted to do was destroy you.

Therefore, Christmas means God must primarily love you and he must want a relationship with you! What must be closest to God's heart is love. The incarnation makes no sense otherwise.

Martin Luther preached dozens of nativity sermons as he loved to meditate on the birth of Jesus. In one of them we read this. “[God] has power to cast us into hell and yet he took soul and body like ours ... if he were against us he would not have clothed himself in our flesh ... Here God is not to be feared, but loved ... O Thou boy, lying in the manger, you are truly God who has created me, and you will not be wrathful with me because you come to me in this loving way – more loving cannot be imagined.”

As I mentioned earlier, many in church history have worked to jettison the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Why did so many others in the church work hard to hold on to it? What is the significance, not just about God becoming a baby, but about him being conceived in the womb of a virgin?

Second, Gabriel's announcement shows our how our sins can be forgiven. Virtually everyone on the planet believes in the concept of sin. We may not want to call it “sin,” but we all believe it. Everyone feels guilty when we do what we know we ought not do, and we feel guilty when we fail to do that which we know we ought to do. Why do we sin? It's both nature and nurture. We are both born sinners, it's in our DNA, and everything about our environment and our desires lead us to continue to sin.

In the New Testament, the Greek word most often translated as “sin” is *hamartia*, and literally it means to “miss the mark” or to “miss the true end and scope of our lives.” We were built with a purpose, to live a life pleasing to God, and when we don't live according to that purpose we feel guilt and shame over our failures. More than that, the Bible says that whether we feel the guilt or not we are actually guilty before God and condemned.

However, Christianity is unique among all the religions of the world when it comes how we escape condemnation. Every other religion is, at the end of the day, a religion of works. They say, “If you're a good person, if your good deeds somehow outweigh your bad deeds, then it will be ok. Your sins will be forgiven and your guilt removed from you.”

Christianity says, “Your good deeds will never outweigh your bad deeds. Even when you do good deeds you do them with impure motives. You can't overcome the guilt of your sin. But you don't have to, because on the cross Jesus did it for you. Jesus died in your place on the cross - the death you deserve - and in so doing he satisfied the debt you owe for your sins, and now you are reconciled to God.” That's the good news, the gospel, of Christianity.

The doctrine of the virgin birth is important because if Jesus was born the ordinary way, the way you and I were born, we couldn't trust his sacrifice on the cross to do anything for us. If Mary

and Joseph were his biological parents, then the sin that clings to us clings to him, and he couldn't die for our sins. If that's true then when he died on the cross, he only died for his sins.

But if the virgin birth is true, if Jesus was conceived differently than you and I were, if his DNA is different, if as Gabriel says the Holy Spirit and not a man brought Jesus into the world, then Jesus is free from the corruption of sin. Because of the Virgin Birth we can look to the cross of Jesus and know our sins are forgiven. In Matthew 1:20b-21 we read where an angel, probably Gabriel, spoke to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Now, I can imagine someone saying, "J.D., I wish I could believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. It sounds great because I do believe I'm a sinner. I know my life is a mess in a lot of ways, and a lot of it is my fault. And I definitely want to believe that God is love, so much so that he would become a baby. It does sound like good news, and I want to believe it – but I'm just not there. I have lots of doubts about this." OK – say that's you.

Second, think about Mary's response. If you aren't sure, there's a lot of hope for you in her response. Luke 1:28-29: ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

Notice that Mary didn't say, "Oh, an angel! How wonderful - I've always wanted to talk to an angel." No, she has the same response we would have. She's "greatly troubled" by Gabriel's appearance. She's frightened and doesn't know what to make of it.

We read in verse 29 Mary "tried to discern" what Gabriel's appearance is all about. The Greek word behind that phrase is *dialogizomai*. We get our word "dialogue" from it, and it literally means "to think intensely and carefully."

Mary sees Gabriel and her brain starts humming and she thinks and wonders, "What could this be all about? Am I hallucinating or is this real?" and then he speaks again and tells her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1:30-33.

The next thing out of Mary's mouth is a question. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34. Gabriel gave all these implications of Jesus' birth, but Mary probably didn't process any of that. She's still trying to understand how she can have a baby in the first place.

What can we learn about Mary's response? *First, notice that Mary thinks and asks questions.* Mary has an encounter with God through one of his messengers, but when she meets him she doesn't check her brain at the door. She immediately starts thinking, processing, questioning, and trying to understand.

And note the messenger doesn't get offended. He doesn't say, "How dare you question me! I'm an angel. You must take all I say on blind faith." No, Gabriel gives Mary an answer. "Even though you've never known a man, Mary, you'll conceive because the Holy Spirit will perform this miracle."

If you're here this morning and you have doubts about the God of the Bible, if you have doubts about whether or not Jesus was born of virgin, I want you to know it's ok. **Even Mary had doubts.**

Perhaps you've been in a church environment in the past where doubts and questions were seen as a sign of moral weakness. I have a friend who grew up in a church where, when he had questions about the Bible, his pastor got angry with him and said, "Don't ask questions - just take it on faith and believe."

That's not the approach the Bible takes. It's perfectly natural to have doubts about the Christian message and to ask questions of its messengers (like me; I'm no angel but I am a messenger). Blind faith is not a virtue in Christianity. You don't get more points with God because you believe him without thinking about it.

The problem comes, instead, when you refuse to think about what Gabriel said. People who claim to be Christians, especially in the South, do this all the time. We don't really think about what Christmas means. Instead, we just put up the Christmas tree, get out the Nativity scene, hang the stockings, buy the presents, listen to the Christmas music, and feel warm and fuzzy inside.

There's nothing wrong with warm and fuzzy, but if you stop there you'll never grow as a Christian. You'll never grow strong in the faith without thinking. Instead, the best thing you can do is, like Mary, think intensely and carefully about Christmas, reason out your faith by identifying your doubts, ask questions, and learn. In so doing you'll work the Christian message deep down into your heart so that you have faith that's ***rooted in truth, not sentiment.***

But it's even more dangerous for people who have doubts and refuse to think about what Gabriel said. Maybe you're here this morning and you have some doubts and you say, "I'm not going to think about this stuff or consider it. I'll just tune J.D. out when it talks about the miraculous stuff in the Bible, or maybe I'll start going to a church in town that doesn't teach the miracles at all (and there are at least a few). Maybe I'll leave the church altogether. But I refuse to give any time to the claims the Bible makes about Christmas."

Say that's you. You know what you're doing? You're signing up for a life where *there's no way you can really know anything about God at all.* If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin, you can't trust the Bible to tell you the truth about God. The Bible is full of miracles, and if none of that is true Christianity is no help to you. You can't find out from Christianity whether God cares about you, whether he loves you, or whether he's angry with you. I know there are watered down versions of Christianity that ignore the miraculous but they are riddled with internal inconsistencies. When you really study them, they fall apart. And if you look to the other

religions on the planet, well, they are no help to you either, because you'll have to deal with the miraculous in them, too.

There's nothing left for you but agnosticism or atheism. Maybe you say you're ok with that, but if you go there then you can't really have any hope at all. You can't have any hope that there is purpose when the hard times come. You're like Hamlet, left to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" all by yourself. You can be sure that one day you will die, but you can't know what awaits you on the other side of death with any assurance at all.

If you're here this morning and you struggle to believe in the virgin birth and the rest of the Christian message, that's understandable. You have doubts about the virgin birth – fine! So did Mary. Frankly, I wouldn't trust anyone who says they've never struggled with it. *But my goodness at least think about it! At least examine it and examine the alternatives. At least sit some messenger like a pastor or an elder down who claims to believe these truths and ask them the hard questions. Gabriel, through the gospel of Luke, confronts you with this stupendous news – God became a baby in Jesus Christ. Will you at least carefully consider it?*

But, *second, we see that after Mary thinks and questions, she follows.* Mary hears the good news from Gabriel and she eventually believes it and when she does she says: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38.

As we've seen, Mary had her doubts, and she also had her fears. A teenage girl like Mary who got pregnant out of wedlock in first-century Israel may or may not get stoned to death – the law of Moses allowed for that, but most scholars think that by the time of Jesus that sort of thing rarely happened. Yet women who conceived out of wedlock certainly had a struggle ahead of them. Mary had to know the whispers, the gossip, and the dirty looks were coming, and that there was going to be a cloud over her and her child all their lives. At this point she didn't even know if Joseph would believe her.

Yet she could say, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Now how could she trust God like that?

Here's what I think happened. Mary heard Gabriel's announcement and after ***thinking and asking questions*** she understood that somehow God would become a baby in her womb. And in understanding that she knew that God, whatever else he was up to, *was laying it all on the line for her and for his people, Israel.*

Mary had to be thinking, "If this is really going to happen, if God is going to take on flesh and become a baby in my womb, then I have to trust him. No matter my doubts, no matter my fears, no matter how hard it's going to be *if God has laid it on the line for me like this I have to be his servant.*"

The more someone commits to you the more sense it makes for you to hold nothing back from them. When you get married, what are you doing? You're making a formal, lifelong commitment to another person. You have another human being voluntarily saying, "No matter what happens, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, 'til death do

we part I'm holding nothing back from you. Everything I have and everything I am, belongs to you. My life for your life." It's a remarkable thing.

The problem is if you've never been married before you have no idea what a big deal that commitment is. My wife and I got engaged while we were both still in college (Mimi was just a few months removed from being a teenager - she'd just turned twenty) and it understandably caused our parents some concern. When my father-in-law found out I was driving to meet him to have the formal "I want to marry your daughter" talk, he asked my mother-in-law, "They are so young. Do they know what they're doing?" And she replied, "Of course they don't." She was right. We didn't. If we had waited ten years to get married we still wouldn't have known.

But God knew what he was doing. When God decided to become a man in the person of Jesus Christ, when the fullness of God decided to take the form of a human embryo and implant himself in Mary's womb, *he knew exactly what he was getting into. He knew, "This is my life for their lives."*

Friends, no one ever laid it on the line for you more than God did at Christmas. Jesus didn't just become a man for the thirty-three years he walked on the earth. He allowed himself to be crucified on a Roman cross as payment for your sins, and then he was raised from the dead to heaven where he is and will forever be the God-man. *You want to talk about commitment and laying it all on the line?* Christmas means that Jesus, though God, will never stop being a man.

So if you believe in the virgin birth, then what in the world are you doing just messing around with Christianity? *Are you playing the role of a follower of Jesus, or are you actually following him?* Because the only sane response to what God has done for you at Christmas is to throw off everything that hinders and say, "Behold, I am the Lord's servant; let it be to me according to your word."

Just about the only thing you can be sure of is that when Jesus calls you to follow him he will call you out of what is easy and comfortable for you. He will call you to forgive and love from the heart those who have hurt you. He will call you to serve those around you. He will call you to give your money away to help others and the spread of the gospel. He will call you to make big life changes – leave your career and take up a new one, to have a family, to adopt a child. He may call you to become a missionary. But the only sane response is to follow him through it all.

And if you're here this morning and you don't believe in the virgin birth – if you don't believe in Christianity at all, maybe you don't even believe in a god at all – I want you to ask yourself a question: wouldn't it be wonderful if a God like this existed? Could you make up a better god than the God of the Bible? A God who created you just for the joy of loving you, and then, after you rebelled against him and rejected him, went to such lengths to bring you back to him? Wouldn't that be a God worth worshipping?

That's the promise of Christmas. Listen to Gabriel. Look at Mary's example - think, ask questions, work your doubts - and then I pray you too will get to the point where you can gladly say, "I am the Lord's servant; let it be to me according to your word." PRAY

