



Scripture & Sermon

Dec 20, 2020

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Luke 1:26-38

26 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.

Sermon

Gracious and Loving God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

I got to make a short trip out to visit with my grandma at the end of this week. Of course it was as safe as it could be with much hand washing and masking up all day long. I went to visit to keep up our tradition of Christmas baking Julekake. Long ago she took up the mantle of baking the Norwegian Christmas bread my grandpa's mom baked. She did it by herself for years, but started including me when I would be around their house near the holidays when I was young. Over the years, as I gained experience, and strength, and as she started to get a bit more tired out by the whole thing, I would help more and more, until this year, I made it mostly by myself. The Julekake is a treasured part of our Christmas festivities. We bake it usually within a week of Christmas, then tightly wrap it up in tinfoil, where it stays protected until we open it again on Christmas morning, share in some pieces as part of our family brunch, and then divvy up the rest of the 3 loaves to everyone to take home and cherish until the last piece. Well, at least we do in my house. It is a beloved tradition of mine and truly marks Christmas time for me. Of course, I love the bread. But really, what makes it special for me is the tradition of annually spending that time making it with my Grammy. The tradition is the love of family and that no matter where I am in life, except for the one year I was not living in the country and I think even that year we made a second batch in January, I have always made sure to schedule in a day before Christmas to spend making it with Gram. We always know we love each other, but making sure we have always kept that tradition is a special reminder of how much we love each other and how much we always think of each other. The tradition of Julekake will continue on with me and in the tradition will always live my Grammy and Gram Bea, my great grandma.

As the tradition of making Julekake is an annual reminder of Gram's and my love, that is similar to what Christmas is all about: a time to be sure that at least once a year, we remember how much God loves us. We are assured through today's passage just how much God loves each and every one of us, as God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. We protestants don't like to talk about Mary too much, we don't want to be like those Catholics! But, like other things in faith and life, we may have let the pendulum swing too far, because we don't talk about Mary much at all past what the Hymns say about her.

The book of Luke gives us a bit of a bigger window into who Mary is and why she is important to our faith story. The Gospel of Luke tells the stories of two miraculous pregnancies, first the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth who were unable to conceive a child until the time they were too old to expect they would have a child. They have their own full story with a pretty wild visit from Gabriel. Each of these stories about these miraculous women are special in their own right, but when we read them together, the story of Elizabeth gives us some more information about Mary. This particularly comes to light if we compare the ways that Elizabeth and Mary are introduced. For Elizabeth, verses 5-6 say, **“5** In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **6** Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Zechariah is a priest himself and from a line of important priests. Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron, brother of Moses, who was the first priest and started that tradition. We read later in the chapter that they live in Judea, which is the higher class region where Jerusalem is. They are not just high in status, but it also says they were righteous and live blamelessly. They sound like they would be the perfect candidates for God to pick to raise the Messiah by our human standards. After the rest of the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, we shift to the story of Mary and Joseph. Quick sidenote: the “in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God” part at the very beginning is referring to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. It confused me the first time I read through the passage, so I wanted to be sure to share that detail. So, it’s 6 months into Elizabeth’s pregnancy, and here enters Gabriel again, though to quite different circumstances. Now, he goes to Nazareth in Galilee which is a small, simple town of agriculture. There he visits with a young woman, not yet married, and still a virgin. She has no named status, and only her betrothed has any lineage worth noting, which is from the house of David. There is no mention of their faith or righteousness. By all standards, they are basically nobodies. It is to this Mary, without title or noted characteristics, that the angel Gabriel appears and says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The angel shows up in the most unexpected place, to unexpected people, with an unexpected message. So

unexpected, that before the Angel could even tell Mary the news, she was perplexed and confused by the greeting. Then Gabriel drops the bomb, “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.” God did not choose the high and privileged, but a normal person, with normal faith to bear God’s Son. It is these small town people, who will face a bunch of drama at Mary being pregnant out of wedlock, that are made the parents of God made flesh, God incarnate. God so loved us, that God wanted his son to experience the average Jewish life, that God wanted his Son to turn every expectation and standard on its head. God so loves us, that we are reminded by this Christmas story every year that God uses all sorts of people, not just the privileged or the seemingly perfect. God looked at Mary, imperfect as she was, and knew that she would do well as Jesus’s mother, and knew that she would be able to say, “Okay, as you say, God.”

God’s love for us is great and beyond our expectations and Mary’s story reminds us that it’s okay if that doesn’t always make sense to us or we aren’t always sure it’s there. Gabriel says, “Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, basically the biggest deal ever. He will bring about the Kingdom without end.” And Mary responds with, “How can this be?” This woman, in the presence of a real Angel, but yet somehow not afraid like every other person who interacts with an Angel, who was just told that she will have a baby through God’s power, and her reaction is not the reaction of gratitude befitting such an honor, but of, “Who me?? How??” And she is given an answer. It will be through the action of the Holy Spirit and Father God, the child will be the Son of God. And oh yeah, you may want to check in with your cousin Elizabeth, who has some experience in this arena. “For nothing will be impossible with God.” It is with that second reminder of God’s greatness and mysterious plans at work that Mary responds in faith, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” For the record, it is this part of the story that gives us the answer to the favorite song: Mary, Did You Know? The answer is yes. She did, and the next bit in Luke is actually her explaining how well she knows it. A beautiful and powerful song, but ultimately, yeah.... She kinda knew that her son, Jesus, was gonna be pretty great.

Though that question does not make the most sense, Mary's question of "How can this be?" is an important one for us to remember. Oftentimes we find ourselves like Mary in the in between of "How can this be?" and fully trusting, "Nothing will be impossible for God." This is particularly a year full of looking around and wondering how God is at work among us and how God will make the circumstances work. Wondering about where God is when the human dramas rise. Mary's "How can this be?" surely was not just a logistics question, but also a bit of who me? And how will I deal with this? She surely knew as Gabriel told her what would happen with her, that she would be facing scrutiny, that Joseph would be tempted to cancel their betrothal. "How can this be?" How is God working through all of that drama? How will she be maintained through it all? The space between this question of Mary and the eventual resolution of "Nothing will be impossible for God" as Gabriel does the explaining, is a pun-intended, pregnant pause, a space that Gabriel, and God through Gabriel, held Mary's questions and worries. Did not dismiss them or shame her for them, but instead welcomed the question and honored it with an answer. We, too, are allowed to question and wonder, to worry and doubt when God's plans seem impossible. But God's love for us is greater than those questions. God does not get insecure or uptight and only dole out God's love to the more righteous or most faithful, or most sure and least questioning. God loves all people, including a questioning Mary, including a questioning us. God proves it by sending us his Son to live and teach and die among us, showing us that a close relationship with us is important and what a close relationship with God can look like through the example of Jesus and other figures like Mary.

This is the radical and big love that we get to celebrate this time of year. A love of our God who shatters our expectations, who challenges us to look at the world differently, who sees the most ordinary person as worthy of being a part of great things, who values our humanness so much that God wanted to experience it firsthand. This is the love we get to remember and emulate every year for Christmas. This is the love that we mirror every time we share in Christmas traditions that warm our hearts and remind us of the importance of love. This is the love that is worth having faith in and being in relationship with God to feel more of. This Christmas means a lot of our beloved

traditions and Christmas activities have had to be cancelled, but, the way we love each other does not have to be. There may be moments this season that you think about trying to share Christmas cheer and love and think, "How can it be??" Let us remember this story of an ordinary girl being thrust into crazy circumstances and trusting that "nothing will be impossible for God." God so wants us to share love with each other and be in relationship with each other, even if that means from afar for now. With God working with us, Christmas love will continue to be felt and shared in old and new ways. We may have to look for it a little harder and be a bit more creative in sharing it ourselves, but it is no less alive, just as God's plan for Mary was no less real in her moments of uncertainty and doubt.

Let us pray.

Less than one week left, Lord, just a handful of days left. Can we get all the things done that we have set before us? Have all the cards been mailed, the greetings extended, the gatherings coordinated and placed in our calendar for this last rush before the BIG DAY? Have we forgotten anything? Have we forgotten anyone? It would be easy to say, we have forgotten the reason for the season....that phrase which is imprinted on key chains and coffee mugs. We think that if we post the note that says "Jesus is the reason for the season", we will truly be fulfilling our Christmas commitment. How foolish we are! Placing the words on the wall, taped to a bulletin board, on a refrigerator, does not place the words in our hearts. We replace the glorious story of God's Incarnate word, with tinsel and wrapping paper and believe that we are ready to celebrate. When will we learn? Come to us now, comforting God, with your powerful words of healing. Help us to remember the witness of Mary, a young girl, who never expected to play such a role in salvation history. Put the brakes on our rushing and sit us down to hear the story of your absolute Love for us. Get us ready for the birth of your Son who will become our Savior. Move us from the focus of our festivities to a focus on witnessing about your love through serving others. Challenge us to reach out to people in need, not only with a check to support a particular endeavor, but with actual contact in ministries of sacrifice and service. In such times as this remind us that we are called to proclaim your love through witness and service.

AMEN.