

After Darkness Light

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

What Child Is This?

December 5th, 2021

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I'd invite you to open it now to Luke 1:26-38. We're spending some time in the first couple of chapters in Luke's Gospel as we anticipate the first coming of our Lord and Savior's birth. This morning we are taking a look at what is sometimes called "the annunciation" – in street level English this is the announcement of the coming birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary by the Angel Gabriel. Hopefully you've found the passage now. I'll begin reading at verse 26. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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. (Luke 1:26–38 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I mentioned last week that church history records that Luke interviewed Mary extensively before writing this Gospel – and that shows up here. There is no other possible source for this story than her.

Mary of course, is an interesting character in the history of the church. I think it is possible to make too much of Mary – and also possible to make too little. I mean, think of what Mary does in this story – think of what Mary risks in this story.

Historians tell us that she would have been between 12 and 16 years old when this happened – that was the typical age of betrothal at this point in Jewish history. She was betrothed to a man named Joseph, but they were not yet married. Betrothal in those days was actually a pretty big deal. It was FAR more serious than our modern-day engagement. You couldn’t just break a betrothal the way you can break an engagement. A betrothal in those days could only be ended through divorce. So it was ALMOST marriage - and yet, there was typically no sexual intercourse between the couple during this period – usually the husband was establishing his trade and preparing his home – at which point he would receive the bride and consummate the marriage.

Betrothals typically lasted about a year.

So, somewhere in that year, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would bear a son. Mary’s response: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”, indicates not unbelief or skepticism but rather puzzlement. How can I, as a virgin who has not yet been with her husband, bear a son?

That's not a bad question – and because it was a worthy question, it receives a fulsome answer.

We'll come back to that in just a minute – but for now look at how Mary responded. When she heard about this child – who he was and what he would do – she said immediately:

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”
(Luke 1:38 ESV)

Do with me and through me as you will – whatever the cost and whatever may come.

This is recorded in the Bible because of the incredible faith and trust that it demonstrates. Mary isn't married – so a pregnancy will be difficult to explain. It will expose her to significant shame and even physical risk. Everyone would assume of course that Mary had been sexually immoral. They will assume that she was sleeping around. The punishment for adultery in that culture was DEATH – so from this point forward Mary would be in danger.

And yet – this young girl – this teenage girl said:

“let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38 ESV)

That is a response we ought to admire. But more than admire, it is a response we ought to dig in to. What was it about this child that convinced Mary to give over her body to the purposes of the Lord? What was it about this child that fortified Mary for the trials and shame and hardships that would surely lie ahead? That's what I want to focus on this morning. You have to know what Mary knew to trust like Mary did. So let's look at that, let's look at what the angel Gabriel said about this child who was coming.

What Child Is This?

The first thing he said about this child is that he would save his people from their sins:

1. A child who will save his people from their sins

We actually have to combine two passages to see what I think Mary would have understood intuitively. In verse 31 the angel Gabriel says to her:

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. (Luke 1:31 ESV)

The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves” – Mary knew that, but of course, many of us may not pick up on that. Thankfully, in Matthew’s Gospel that little bit of information is made explicit.

There the angel says:

“you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”
(Matthew 1:21 ESV)

That’s important for us to see. Jesus didn’t come to save us from poor economic conditions or from bad life choices or from oppressive political regimes – Jesus came to save us from our sins.

Now is that to say that Jesus doesn’t care about those other things? No. It is to say that Jesus came to fix that which God had identified as the ultimate problem. The ultimate problem in the Bible is sin. Not our circumstances. Not society.

Sin.

The ultimate problem – the ROOT problem in this world is sin. Sin separates us from God and distorts our perception of the world. And it lives at the centre of the human heart. The Bible says:

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately **wicked**; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

I can never decide what my favourite translation of that passage is. The ESV is really helpful as well, it says:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately **sick**; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

The Hebrew word there that the ESV has as “sick” and the NKJV has as “wicked” is actually *anash*. It means:

“frail, feeble, or (figuratively) melancholy:—desperate(-ly wicked), incurable, sick, woeful.”¹

It is the human heart that leads us astray, the Bible says. It is has become infected. It is so much weaker than it was originally created. It is frail now – unable to think strong thoughts or hold to a wise course. It is WOEFUL. Inadequate. Defective.

Ronald Clements provides an excellent summary of what the prophet is saying here, he says:

“In answer to the question “Why do human beings behave so badly and pursue such absurd illusions?” the answer is readily given: “Because they trust their own thinking rather than God’s!”²

In our weak, frail, sick, feeble condition we think thoughts – we have illusions and beliefs and desires – that we trust in MORE than the unchanging, life-giving Word of God – that’s what’s wrong with human beings! That’s why we keep ending up face down in the ditch! We have a broken heart that always inclines in the wrong direction!

That’s what’s wrong with us – and that’s why we cannot save ourselves!

If you’re lost AND your GPS is infected with a virus then YOU ARE LOST INDEED.

¹Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament, s.v. “אֲנָשׁ,” paragraph 612.

² R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching And Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 106.

That's why Mary's baby was given the name Jesus, because WE cannot save ourselves – we need to be saved by YAHWEH! We need him to take away our sins and to put something healthy and reliable into our hearts.

That's what Jesus came to do. Thanks be to God – the child born to Mary will save his people from their sins!

Now we could probably end there – that's enough isn't it? It's enough to know that God sees us – we may be lost, but we aren't lost to him - he sees us and he is coming to save us. What else do we need to know? We don't need any more – but there is more, Gabriel goes on to tell Mary that the child she will bear will be called the Son of God.

2. A child who will be called the Son of God

What does that mean?

Well, it probably meant something different to Mary than it does to us. In the ears of a first century Bible reading Jewish person, the phrase “Son of God” was most immediately associated with the story of the Kings in the line of David.

As a member of the house of David, Mary would have known this story very well. In 2 Samuel 7 David wants to build a house for the Lord – he wants to build the TEMPLE. But God comes along and he says: “You're not going to build ME a house, I'm going to build YOU a house” and he promises that he will turn David's house into something really special. He will turn the family of David into a political dynasty and he promises to maintain a very special relationship with all the royal sons of David. He starts off by talking about Solomon, so in 2 Samuel 7:13-16 God says:

“He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. **14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.** When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the

sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:13–16 ESV)

So God says that he will treat the sons of David as if they were HIS SONS. When they go astray, he will punish them, but he won't reject them. He will treat them like sons. When your sons make mistakes, you discipline them, but you don't stop loving them and you never give up on them – that's what God is saying here.

So in the history of Israel, the Kings in the line of David were often spoken of as God's sons. So for example in Psalm 2 it says:

⁶ “As for me, I have set **my King** on Zion, my holy hill.”

⁷ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “**You are my Son**; today I have begotten you.

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” (Psalm 2:6–8 ESV)

So the Royal Sons of David were to be understood as, in some sense, the sons of God – but the problem was that the royal sons of David were an absolute MESS – so God was ALWAYS punishing them. He was never rejecting them – never hating them – never giving up on them – but they were always messing up – they were always going astray and therefore God was always disciplining them and that made life HARD – for them and for the people of Israel as a whole and so the HOPE for Israel at this point in history – had come to FOCUS on the promise of an OBEDIENT SON.

If we could just have a Royal Son of David who was OBEDIENT TO GOD FROM THE HEART – then we could live the lives we were created and commissioned by God to live!

That was the OLD TESTAMENT HOPE – and that is what Gabriel was promising here to the Virgin Mary.

I. Howard Marshall brings these threads together – commenting on 2 Samuel 7 and this promise made to Mary in Luke 1. He says:

“the father-son relationship is used to express the divine care extended to David’s son and his corresponding obligation of obedience to God.”³

So when Mary heard that – that Jesus would be called Son of God – she understood that to mean that her son would obey God perfectly, from the heart – and as such, he would lead his people into a new era of blessing, bounty, purpose and prosperity.

Now – did it mean more than that? Absolutely it did and we’ll hear about that in just a minute – but that’s almost certainly how Mary heard those words when they were first spoken to her by the angel Gabriel.

Her son would be a Savior, her son would be obedient – and thirdly, her son would sit on the throne of his father David.

3. A child who will reign on the throne of his father David

Gabriel says that in 32:

“And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32 ESV)

So Jesus will not just be in the line of David – there were a lot of people in the line of David – all of Jesus’ earthly brothers were in the line of David – but here we are told that he will sit on the THRONE of his father David. He will not just be king in theory he will be king in REALITY.

But in a way and at a time of his own choosing – we see that again and again and again in the outworking of this story.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 67.

In John 6 after the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 the Bible says:

“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” (John 6:15 ESV)

That was not the time – and that was not the way.

We see something similar in his interview with Pilate. Pilate had been told that a potential king of the Jews had been arrested on suspicion of sedition. John 18:33-37 says:

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:33–37 ESV)

So Jesus doesn't dispute that he was a king but he says that his kingdom is not of this world – if it were of this world then his disciples would be fighting, but they're not.

That's NOT how the Kingdom of God will come.

And that's not why Jesus has come in this coming – in this coming Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth. In this coming he has come to SPEAK and to SUMMON. He has come to call people out of DARKNESS INTO HIS MARVELLOUS LIGHT.

Thus it would seem that Jesus will sit on the throne of his father David as part of his SECOND COMING because this part of the angel's promise has not yet been realized.

TO BE CLEAR - Jesus is reigning NOW – he is seated right NOW at the right hand of the THRONE OF GOD – but he is not yet reigning over all things here on earth FROM the throne of his father David – it is no lack of faith or respect to acknowledge that. The New Testament acknowledges that. Hebrews 2:8-9 says:

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor (Hebrews 2:8–9 ESV)

So Jesus is MAXIMALLY EXALTED but his Kingdom has not been ENTIRELY CONSUMMATED on this earth. We remain in the season of invitation.

But a time of consummation is coming. A time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD and of his kingdom and of his authority there shall be no end – thanks be to God, that’s the fourth thing that Gabriel promises in this passage.

4. A child whose kingdom and authority will never end

And no doubt, that would have come as something of a surprise to Mary. The Jewish people were looking for a Messiah, but they did not expect the Messiah to live and rule forever. They expected a son of David to sit on the throne of David – but they expected that he would live and die as David did – having done great things as David did – having defeated all their enemies as David did – having made them into a legitimate empire as David did – but then they expected that he would grow old and die – as all kings do.

And yet, Gabriel promises that this one wouldn’t.

Listen carefully. He says:

“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 1:32–33 ESV)

That’s bigger and better in a couple of different ways than what people were expecting. The Tyndale New Testament Commentary points that out. It says:

“In current Messianic speculations the Messianic kingdom was often seen as of limited duration.”⁴

So they thought the kingdom would be GREAT but they didn’t expect it to last forever and they thought the king would be great but they didn’t expect him to LIVE forever – they would have been perfectly happy with a return to the glory days of David and Solomon – but what Gabriel promises here is something BIGGER and BETTER than they had ever hoped for, asked for or imagined.

Gabriel speaks of an Eternal King and an Eternal Kingdom coming into the world in the form of this little baby who would be born to the Virgin Mary.

How can this be?

That’s a good question because Mary is a virgin and human babies don’t live or reign or do anything forever. Ever since the Garden of Eden, human babies DIE.

But this baby would be different. He would be born of the very Spirit of God.

That’s the fifth and final thing I want you to see here.

5. A child who will be born of the Spirit of God

⁴Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 90.

Look at verse 35. The angel says to Mary:

“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 ESV)

So here we learn that the title “Son of God” means MORE than just that he will be an obedient son of David – it does mean that – but it ALSO means that Jesus will be SON OF GOD in the sense that he is the PRESENCE OF GOD coming into the WOMB of the Virgin Mary in some manner of miraculous conception. Jesus is truly the son of Mary but he is also truly GOD IN HUMAN FLESH.

Don’t ask me to explain that – I’m just telling you what is there in the TEXT. Jesus is TRULY HUMAN – if you checked his DNA you would be able to PROVE his relation to Mary – and yet he is TRULY GOD. He is GOD OF VERY GOD. How does that work you ask?

I have absolutely no idea!

The incarnation is the ultimate miracle! It is GOD doing that which is impossible – but God is very good at that sort of thing as Gabriel reminds Mary in verse 37:

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37 ESV)

So we can’t EXPLAIN this – but we can attempt to wrestle with the implications. There are some hints as to what this MEANS even if we are left completely in the dark in terms of the basic mechanics.

In terms of what it MEANS it appears we are to understand this as a totally new way for God to take up residence among his people. Back in the Old Testament when God wanted to DWELL with his people his PRESENCE would DESCEND visibly and tangibly upon a designated place –

a designated sanctuary. That happened in Exodus 40, for example, after the construction of the tabernacle. Exodus 40:34-35 says:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud **settled on it**, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34–35 ESV)

Do you know what the Greek Old Testament actually says there? It says that the cloud OVERSHADOWED IT – the exact same word used in verse 35 here to describe the process of Christ’s conception:

“the power of the Most High will **overshadow you**” (Luke 1:35 ESV)

So the incarnation is like that! It is like when the PRESENCE OF GOD settled down upon the tabernacle and FILLED the SKIN of the Old Testament sanctuary. It’s like that! By the way – does that help explain why Jesus said:

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (John 2:19 ESV)

He was saying: I am the tabernacle! I am the temple! I am the NEW WAY for God to take up residence among his people!

That’s what was going on inside the womb of the Virgin Mary!!! A child was being born who would save his people from their sins. A child was being born who would obey God perfectly from the heart! A child was being born who would reign on the throne of his father David. A child was being born whose kingdom and authority would have no end. A child was being born – like no child who had ever been born before – and like no child who has ever been born since. A child who was truly human and truly God – a child who was born of the very Spirit of God.

So – what should we do when we are confronted with a child such as this?

We should do what everyone else in this story does. We should come and worship. Worship Christ the new-born King.

Let's do that now; let's pray together.