

II. Advent in Biblical Perspective  
From No News to Good News  
“The Angelic Ministry of Christmas – Mary”  
Luke 1:26-38  
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December 4, 2022 • Sunday Morning Sermon

Luke 1:26-38 says [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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

One of the men I've enjoyed studying in my life is no surprise to many of you, it's John Calvin. John Calvin was in exile as a reformer. He sought simply to have a life of a scholarly pursuit. He felt his contributions would be in the area of scholarship and publications. In fact, he had already begun writing what we now know as the Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin's Institutes that would undergo six edits until he got to his final product. When he was out seeking asylum in various places, a man by the name of William Farel called him to take over the pastorate at a burgeoning church of the reformed faith in Geneva. Farel pressed it upon him and said to him, “Calvin, if you don't come, may God curse your scholarly pursuits.” With such a ringing declaration, Calvin became very sensitive to this. In fact, he received the call to be the pastor at St Peter's there in Geneva, and he came to be their pastor. In the preaching of the Word, it was just in a matter of three years that he was sent away from Geneva by the church fathers, the elders, as well as the city fathers so his ministry there lasted three years.

Calvin went over to Strasburg and had a wonderful three-year ministry there, along with a man named of Martin Butzer. As he was ministering to the international church, all of the various exiles that were fleeing the persecutions of the Reformation, the Lord was blessing him. I have had the privilege to stand in that church where he pastored in Strasburg, and then to go from there back to St Peter's. Geneva wrote him again and asked him to come. He prayed about it but didn't want to come in for he loved where he was because he had time to write and preach. He was marvelously supported and loved the moments there. He wanted to stay, but after a while he became convinced that the Lord was calling him there. So he returned to Geneva.

Calvin was first in Geneva from 1536 to 1538, and then was asked to leave. He was gone from 1538 and returned in 1541. Now, why do I tell you this story? When he came back in 1541, the first Sunday he was back, he went to the pulpit, opened the Scriptures and he began to preach. His text was the next verse from the preaching that he did the last Sunday he was there three years earlier. He just picked up where he left off in the exposition of God's Word.

Whenever I study for the Advent season and think of the ministry of God to His people to bring forth our Savior, I seem to always realize that God had been silent for 400 years before this. This isn't the first time God's been silent for 400 years. He told Abraham He would put them in affliction and oppression for 400 years as He was maturing, mobilizing and multiplying His people in Egypt. Then He spoke and sent Moses to lead them out.

So, as we study the Advent season, He has been silent for 400 years with His last Words coming through teachers such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Here's what I want you to remember from our last study; He may have been silent in those 400 years, but He was not silent about those 400 years. God had already laid out in Daniel 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11 and in Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi, the things that were going to transpire in those 400 years, as not only the Assyrian and Babylonian Empire had been removed, but the Medo-Persian Empire will be removed and then will come the Greek Empire that was prophesied as well as the Roman Empire which was prophesied. The grand scope of what God sovereignly was doing during those 400 years had been communicated to them in the very prophetic words of the Old Testament.

God was not silent about those 400 years and He was not absent for He was present in them. How do you get Zechariah and Elizabeth back from Babylonian captivity and the entire line of the priest that is put back into place? How did that temple get there where Zechariah met the Angel and how did that line of David get preserved that would bring forth Mary and Joseph, as we have the genealogy of Mary in Luke and the genealogy of Joseph in Matthew? How is all that happening? God was sovereignly weaving together, causing all things to work together for the good of His people and for His glory.

What really interests me and why I told you about Calvin is, when God finally speaks and breaks His sovereign, self-imposed silence, He picks right up where He left off. The last words in the canon of Scripture were in Malachi where He says He will send one who will come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and will turn the hearts of fathers to their children in the hearts of children to their fathers (Malachi 4:5-6). While we have the four Good News epistles, the Gospels – no news to good news – it's the third gospel that is the Gospel of Luke, to which God sovereignly assigns His first utterance after 400 years of silence. Fittingly, it's in the temple. It is Luke who puts together the birth narratives and the Incarnation.

Luke begins with the birth narrative that's announced to Zechariah then Elizabeth. He announces it in the temple as Zechariah is doing his responsibility, which likely he only had the opportunity to do one time in his lifetime. While he is there interceding in prayer; praying what any and all of them would have been praying, 'come Messiah, come Messiah, come Messiah.' It is there that the angel appears beside the altar and says to Zechariah, 'Your prayers have been heard and the proof that your prayers have been heard and the Messiah is coming is you and Elizabeth will bear a child.' This is not just any child for this is the child that is the fulfillment of the last words that were spoken in the canon of the Old Testament. He will be the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah, turning the hearts of fathers to their children in the hearts of children to their fathers.

I understand why people would read that and say this is a passage that tells us the importance of the family and certainly the importance of the families, their fathers to children and children to father, but I would suggest to you that's not the direct application of that, that Elijah would come and his ministry would be one of turning. What does he preach? Repentance, and he is calling the fathers of the faith to turn to the children of God as they're about to have this glorious Gospel movement of the Christ who comes into the world. It is preceded by the movement of reformation as the fathers of the faith, just as the patriarchs and the prophets are now called to repentance. It's not about you. It's about Jesus and the fathers hearts are turned to the children. He tells us in the text these are the children of God.

Will that have a benefit to our nuclear families, our natural families? Absolutely, but He is looking at the family of God being moved to this moment where the light of the Gospel is coming in the power of His Son, Jesus Christ. Zechariah is informed that Jesus is coming, the Messiah is coming and the sign will be that he and Elizabeth are going to have a child, though, barren, it will be a providential miracle that is about to take place for the one who is barren is going to bear the child, and this child is the fulfillment of the last words God spoke so we see how God just picked right up where He left off. This one who comes in the spirit of Elijah, will initiate the call to repentance of fathers to their children, the children of God, to care for them and then the children to hear those fathers who with servant hearts, are leading them to the glories of the Almighty covenant keeping God.

Then comes the second word. It doesn't come immediately. It comes six months later. Here comes the second time God is going to speak a word after His 400 years of silence. Again, it's being delivered by an angel, an angel named, Gabriel. I'm really interested in this matter of angelic ministries, and I don't overdo this, but another named angel in the Bible is Michael. Michael is the warrior angel, as he's usually got a big battle to fight and Gabriel seems to be the teaching/counseling angel for he's always instructing. He has instructed Zechariah, he instructed Daniel and now he is giving instruction to Mary. No longer are we in the environs of the temple. Now we move to the central part of the Promised Land up at Nazareth. Nazareth is about 20 to 25 miles from the Mediterranean Sea and about 15 to 20 miles from the Sea of Galilee and the eastern borders.

Nazareth was a twin city. It had another city that was right next to it, a city called Cana. It is a very small city, estimated around 200 to 300 people probably living there at that time. In the Gospel of John 1:46 it says, [46] *Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."* It was not a city of renown by any means, not a city of fame, but it is there that the Almighty sends Gabriel and not simply to Nazareth, but to a specific person in Nazareth. He comes to a virgin.

Virgin is an interesting word and I want you to remember it. It means a young woman and, in that context, probably teenage years. We don't know what age in the teenage years and it means a young woman who is not yet engaged in marital intimacy. Mary, in her genealogy in the Gospel of Luke is of the line of David and she is betrothed. Mary would have been a very common name, as you can tell in your Bible for there are all kinds of Mary's showing up in the Bible. One of the reasons why is probably the most famous woman from the Old Testament was Miriam and Mary is the derivative of Miriam. So many of them would be named after Miriam.

Mary is betrothed which in that day would have been three steps of marriage but have not yet got to the point of consummation. She is married to a man whose name is Joseph who is also of the line of David. Most people think betrothal is like the engagement. It's more than engagement because you were considered married when you were betrothed. In fact, if you broke

the betrothal, you had to get a divorce – a writ of divorce to break the betrothal. The betrothal set up about a one year time in which everything but marital intimacy was embraced. It was a time in which the man manifests his ability to take care of the one he was taking to himself and the woman manifest her fidelity to that man, then would come the ceremony and the consummation. In this text, Mary is still a virgin betrothed to Joseph, not yet ceremonially joined and not yet consummated.

At this point Gabriel finds her and delivers to her the message of Good news. Luke 1:28 says [28] *And he (Gabriel) came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”* Other translations say rightly ‘O highly favored one.’ Favor is an interesting word. It means the blessings of grace. It's another word for grace. So it could read ‘O graced one...’ This is a declaration of Divine Grace. Literally in the text it could read she is favored, favored. Now, why is she favored, favored? It is because she not only has the favor of grace in her salvation, she has the favor of God in her designated vocation. She will bear the Messiah. She has been graced with salvation and graced with this vocation, and the announcement is now coming to her.

Why is the Lord going to be with her? Luke 1:29 says [29] *But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.* Why am I being greeted with a declaration of grace, grace upon grace, and the assurance that the Lord is going to be with me? Luke 1:30 says [30] *And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.* She was blessed of God.

Ever since the Reformation that issues of Mariology have compounded. I have two great concerns. Number one is that of the reaction to the heretical teachings around Mary that she is the queen of heaven, that she was the co-mediatrix with Jesus, all of those things, must be rejected. There is the loss of the fact that this was a very godly woman and commends herself much for our study as in her life as she points to Christ. As she receives this news she is troubled and so the angel Gabriel begins to comfort her by teaching her. He basically says ‘You have found favor, not you have earned favor. You are an object of God's grace in your salvation and in this vocation to which you are being called.’ Let's see what else Gabriel says to Mary.

Luke 1:31 says [31] *And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.* I confess I'm getting ready to speculate here. There is no way that Mary does not know what is being said. If she doesn't, she knows it pretty quickly. This is Isaiah 7:14 which says [14] *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* She shall conceive as a virgin. The virgin shall conceive in her womb and the One she bears is Immanuel – God with us. Mary is told God will be with her and with her in this call that she has been given and that in Him she will conceive and bear a Son.

Luke 1:32-33 says [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.”* She is told that this One whom she will bear is King of all Kings, is King forever, and His Kingdom shall never. She knows this is the Messiah and the Holy Spirit will come upon her.

I cannot tell you how many times I've tried to describe this miraculous work of the virgin conception. We call it the virgin birth, and it is a virgin giving birth, but the miracle is at the conception. The reason the virgin is giving birth is because a virgin conceived – it was a virgin conception. There have been miraculous births and Mary is already informed of one. She is informed of Elizabeth's miraculous birth – the one who is beyond childbearing age is going to

bear a son. Elizabeth isn't the first one. In the Old Testament there is Sarah and Hannah where God is intervening and bringing providential miraculous births. But this one is unique, one of a kind. This isn't an older woman enabled to bear birth in contradiction to the laws of creation.

This is a young woman who is betrothed but has not engaged in marital intimacy. She is told she will conceive, how? The Holy Spirit will come upon her. I have searched throughout my life to try to communicate this and I think I can't do any better than J. Gresham Machen does in his seminal volume on the virgin birth and what I was taught at Westminster Seminary. I think the best way to do this when you're looking at redemption and the coming forth of the Messiah whereby we're going to be redeemed, is to go back to creation, where God spoke and there was creation, but it was darkness, disorder until the Holy Spirit came over the creation and He formed it and filled it. The first thing that comes out of the darkness is light. That's the picture here of the supernatural, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. Another word for that could be use. The Holy Spirit brooded over, like a hen broods over her chicks. He brooded over the creation, brought order, brought filling, brought all that would be in place. So the Holy Spirit broods in and over the womb of Mary.

Now Genesis 3 makes sense. To the serpent He said, Your seed will be in enmity with the woman's seed and the woman will have a seed and her seed will bruise the head of the serpent. There will be a cost as the heal this bruise, but the lethal blow will be upon Satan by the seed of the woman and we know women don't have seed. Now understand we're in confusion in our present culture where now we talk about persons having babies. Persons don't simply have babies – those who are born female alone can procreate children, but normally the seed would come from the man. In the case of the virgin birth, this is going to be a woman who is highly favored and there will be no seed from the man. That is crucial, because if Jesus comes from the seed of Joseph, then Jesus is born of the seed of Adam and that meant He would have been born with a sin nature and a sin record. Jesus would have been another consequence of original sin.

But no, this is a New Adam who has come and He doesn't come from the seed of Joseph. Joseph will be His legal adopted father and Mary will be His appointed mother. His body will come from Mary so He will be one of us. He will be with us. He is one of us, but He doesn't have a sin record nor a sin nature. Why? This One who comes is of the unique, one of a kind moment where the Virgin conceives in the womb as the Holy Spirit in the darkness of that womb is bringing the light of salvation. This is the One who is the Son of the Most High. Is He the Son of Man? Yes. He's also the Son of God. This is the One who is a King and not just any king. He's the King of all Kings and not just a king of a temporal kingdom, but the King of an ever lasting Kingdom. Let's look at Mary's response.

Luke 1:34-38 says [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.*

In this text, we see the announcement, Mary's question and her response. The angel departed, but God did not. He will be with you. Mary says, 'let it be done to me, according to your word.' She surrenders to the call of the Lord and the burden of the Lord – the call and the burden.

Have you ever wondered why the Bible tells you to count the cost when salvation is free? Here is a woman who is graced with salvation and graced with God's calling upon her life. Yet as she receives it, she says, 'Let it be done to me, according to Your word.' The reason Jesus tells us to count the cost is not because salvation can be purchased by us, no salvation for us was purchased by Jesus. Salvation is a free gift, but it costs you everything. It cost you your self. With the blessing of grace comes the call of grace to surrender all to the One who gave all to save us from our sins.

In Mary's case, her calling was to bear the Messiah into this world. Would there be a cost to her calling? My guess is yes. What happens after after the angel departs? Luke 1:39-41 says *[39] In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, [40] and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. [41] And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

Mary makes a quick trip to see Elizabeth and Zechariah. We know Mary was a relative of Elizabeth from other passages of Scripture. Do you remember what the angel had said to Zechariah when he was in the temple praying? The angel told that the one in Elizabeth's womb would be filled with the Holy Spirit and here is the fulfillment. John the Baptist is in her womb when Mary comes to visit. Let's continue.

Luke 1:42-45 says *[42] and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! [43] And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? [44] For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. [45] And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."*

I don't know why Mary goes to see Elizabeth so I'm in absolute speculation when I say she has such respect for Elizabeth that she is still working her way through this and she wants some Godly counsel so she goes to an older woman. Could it be her own father and mother sent her to the older woman thinking they could help her? Could it be all she wanted to get away from all of the mocking and slander against her in Nazareth and maybe even the abandonment of her parents and she had to go to someone and Elizabeth was the only one she could go to? I don't know, but I do know she was bearing a burden and when God brings blessings, those blessings are burdens that we are to bear, that others might be blessed through us. That's what I do know. So when you come to Christ for that salvation, you've come to Christ for your vocation and when you come to Christ for your vocation, that blessing brings a burden of His call upon your life. Now what will you say? Mary said, 'Let it be done to me as You have said. I am the Lord's servant.'

We talk about this and rightly so for we even have songs about it, like the song *Mary? Did you know?* I don't know all that Mary knew, but I do know this. She knew she was bearing the Messiah – the Son of God and Son of Man. She knew this was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. She was the Virgin and there would be the One conceived in her womb. Immanuel, the Lord said, "I will be with you." And she also knows it's going to cost. She didn't know all the cost at this time and we don't know all it cost here because the Bible doesn't give us the details. I know it will not only cost in her pregnancy and her birth, it will cost in her parenting and it will cost when she stands at the cross and a sword pierces her heart. I do know what she said. When the Word of God came with the blessings of grace and the call of grace, her word was surrender – 'Let it be done to me, according to Your word.'

I want to give you that as the takeaway - God's Word reveals the blessings of God's grace that brings the burden of God's blessings through which we bring others to Him, the One who is with us. Mary said, 'let it be done' and through her is coming the Savior of sinners and before He even arrives at the manger, we have the first Incarnation, the first convert of the Incarnate Christ, the one who will lead the way – John the Baptist is converted in his mother's womb. Why? It was because Mary surrendered and brought Jesus to Elizabeth and John the Baptist and Jesus brought them to glory.

Christ has come to save us. Will we bear this glorious, blessed burden of bringing Him to them that they might come to Him? Our salvation is free, but the calling of God upon our life is everything. We no longer live but Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). We bring Him to others, even as Mary brought Him for us, that they might come to Him, even as we have come to Him and said to Him, "Let it be according to Your Word, for we are your servants." Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments in Your Word. In these moment's Jesus, speak to the hearts of Your people. We certainly don't know all that Mary knew but we do know what Mary knew. We do know that she knew that she was bearing the Messiah. We do know that she knew it would cost and we do know that she surrendered. God, I pray that anyone reading this who has not yet come to Jesus would come to Him freely, knowing that everything in Christ has been done to save us from our sins, but do know to come to Christ is to say 'no' to sin and 'yes' to Jesus, to say 'no' to self and 'yes' to Jesus and then to know the freedom and liberty that Jesus brings when we die to ourselves, live unto Him because He is our life. Let it be, O Lord, as You have said. If you would like to pray with someone about a decision to follow Jesus please call us at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we'd love to pray with you about this decision. Thank You Jesus for Your free gift of salvation. Help us fulfill the calling you have placed upon our lives, so that others may come to know You, I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.