



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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You shall call his name Jesus

Luke 1:26-56

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When we were last in the first chapter of St. Luke's Gospel we read about Zechariah and the visit paid to him by the angel, Gabriel. Zechariah was a simple country priest, but the angel came to him as he was serving in the great temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah was offering incense on the altar—a once-in-a-lifetime—experience. As he offered up his prayers for the deliverance of the nation at the altar a crowd was gathered outside on the temple steps praying for deliverance as well. And into that solemn moment stepped Gabriel to announce that God had heard the prayers of his people. Zechariah's elderly and barren wife would soon bear a son. His name was to be called John and he would revive the long-quiet prophetic ministry in order "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17).

As we come now to the twenty-sixth verse, six months have passed and Luke brings our attention to a simple country girl living in a village so small and out of the way that he has to tell his readers where it is. It's a long way from Jerusalem and from the temple.

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. (Luke 1:26-27)

Nazareth was a village of about 1600-2000 people in those days. It's a bit west of the Sea of Galilee and about 100 kilometres north of Jerusalem. It was a backwater if there ever was one. And Gabriel goes there to visit a

young girl named Mary. Luke says that she was betrothed to Joseph, a descendant of David. That tells us several things. First, it tells us that Mary was probably about 12 to 14 years old. That was the usual age for girls to marry. That's what Mary was preparing for. In that culture "betrothal" didn't mean quite what it means today. Mary and Joseph weren't "engaged". Today a girl can return a ring and walk away. In first century Palestine it took a divorce to break a betrothal. It was the first step in marriage and it involved a serious commitment. Witnesses were called, gifts were exchanged, people would celebrate, and then the bride would return to her father's house until she and the groom were ready to formally marry. Our sources also tell us that sexual intercourse wasn't out of the question during the time of betrothal.¹ And so Luke is very clear: Mary was a virgin.

Notice that Luke tells us that Joseph was of the house of David. This is important too. The Messiah who was to come was to be of the line of David. David and his descendants had merely kept the throne of Judah warm for the day when the true king, the Messiah, was to come. Mary, as we'll see, being a cousin of Elizabeth, was of the line of Levi and, more specifically of the line of Aaron. But any child of hers, whether fathered by Joseph or adopted by him, legally inherited his Davidic line. (Depending on how we understand the genealogy that Luke gives in Chapter 3, Mary may also have shared Davidic ancestry with Joseph.) This is the "setup": a simple virgin betrothed to a man with a Davidic heritage.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28)

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." The angel's "greetings"

can also be understood as a call to rejoice, which would certainly be appropriate. He announces to Mary that she has been graciously favoured and that the Lord is with her. And then Luke tells us in verse 29:

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

Literally, Mary was "greatly perplexed", just as Zechariah was when confronted by Gabriel at the altar. Mary was confused by the angel's greeting. Mary was a poor country girl. She wasn't even remotely the sort of person one would greet as "O favoured one". That sort of greeting was reserved for important people—not poor people, not young people, and not girls. And the angel's statement that the Lord was with her isn't so much a greeting as it is a call. This is the sort of language used throughout the Old Testament when God chooses and calls someone to take a role in redemptive history. So we can understand why Mary might be more than a little perplexed. At the same time, remember that this is how God so often works. He called Abraham, a pagan, to be the father of his people; he called David, a simple shepherd, to be the king. God rarely chooses the people we expect; instead he often calls the humble, the poor, and the weak. Gabriel's annunciation to Mary carries on this pattern, but it foreshadows Jesus' ministry too. Darrell Bock writes, "The tone of the setting of Jesus' birth matches the tone of his ministry. The great God of heaven sends the gift of salvation to humans in a serene unadorned package of simplicity."² As Mary will sing later: God exalts those of humble estate.

And so Gabriel goes on. Look at verses 30-33:

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found

¹ J. Julius Scott, Jr. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), p. 250.

² *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), p. 107.

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 his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

He tells her again: “You have found favour with God; the Lord is calling you to take up a part in redemptive history.” And everything Gabriel tells her confirms this: You’re going to conceive and bear a son whose name will be Jesus. Jesus means “Yaweh saves”. It was a common name—a variant of “Joshua”—and many people named their children this, partly in honour of tradition and partly as an expression of hope in God’s deliverance. But in Gabriel’s annunciation the name takes on a more urgent tone; this son will be named Jesus because in him Yahweh *really* is coming to bring salvation. And Gabriel then tells Mary three things about Jesus:

First, he will be called the Son of the Most High. He’ll be called the Son of God. Luke later draws on this to point to Jesus divinity, but at the time this was the title people applied to the coming Messiah. The Jews weren’t expecting a Messiah who was necessarily divine; what they were expecting was a Messiah who had a special relationship with God, who was favoured and empowered by him. It’s only later that they discover God did this by coming himself and taking up our flesh. For Gabriel to say that Mary’s child would be called “Son of the Most High” was a direct and unmistakable reference to the long-awaited Messiah.

Second and third, Gabriel tells her that the Lord will give him the throne of David. Not only that, but that he will reign from that throne forever. Again, these verses point to the Messiah.

Gabriel describes his reign in words borrowed from 2 Samuel—words spoken to David and words that gave the Jewish people hope for a Messiah who would come one day to deliver and reign over them. Through the prophet, Nathan, God spoke to David saying:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 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, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

This is what the Jews had been awaiting for centuries. By the first century their hope for the imminent coming of the Messiah had reached an almost fevered pitch. It was the hope of every girl that she might be honoured to be the Messiah’s mother. And in the fervour of the people, more than a few false Messiah’s had come and gone, but the people were still hopeful and still waiting for his soon coming. Recalling this announcement also gives hope to Theophilus and to Luke’s readers then and now. This king will reign forever. Nothing will get in the way of God’s plan: not crucifixion and not persecution by the Jews and the Romans. And Gabriel announces to Mary and to us that in Jesus the Last Days have come and that God’s kingdom is here. Mary will be the mother of this Messiah.

There’s only one problem:

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”
(Luke 1:34)

Mary apparently picked up on the imminence of Gabriel’s announcement. This was going to happen *soon*, and Mary wasn’t even married yet. Zechariah’s questioning of Gabriel expressed his doubt. Mary’s question expresses her faith. She trusts and she believes what the angel is telling her, but how can she bear this son if she’s still a virgin?

And so Gabriel goes on, confirming that this will not be the biological son of Joseph. Look at verses 35-37:

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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Gabriel points back to the Spirit of God who hovered over the waters of the chaotic and uncreated earth and through whose power God created. God will come upon Mary in his creative power and capacity. Gabriel says that he will “overshadow” Mary. That’s a term that in the Old Testament refers to God’s presence with his people; it recalls the *shekinah*—the cloud of glory that filled the Holy of Holies and rested on the ark. Note that this isn’t the language of sexual procreation. It’s language that looks forward to Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8 that the Holy Spirit would “come up” the disciples. He will come upon Mary in his creative power to give life here and he will come up—and continues to come upon every Christian—in his creative power to create new life in us.

At this point Gabriel also tells Mary that Jesus will be “holy—the Son of God”. Again, everyone knew that the Messiah would be the “Son of God”, but they didn’t understand that to mean that he would be divine. They understood that as meaning he would have a special relationship with God. But here Mary is told that *because of his divine conception*, Jesus will be “holy”—that means “set apart”—and he will be “the Son of God”—his person and ministry will be connected with the miraculous work of the Spirit. This is a theme that Luke will develop more fully once Jesus begins his ministry. At this point Mary didn’t fully understand the implications of what the angel was telling her.

As evidence of God’s power to do this, Gabriel now tells Mary that her elderly and barren cousin, Elizabeth, is already six months pregnant—because “nothing is impossible with God”.

Now consider that at this point Mary’s being pulled in two directions. On the one hand the Lord’s messenger as just announced that God has chosen and called her to play an active role in redemptive history as the mother of the Messiah. That was exciting news. On the other hand, however, this child will not be the natural born son of Joseph. Mary will be pregnant through the creative power of the Spirit. And we can only imagine what people would say—what Joseph would say. “Pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Right...” Everyone would *know* that Mary was just trying to cover her own personal moral failure. No sane person would believe her story, and that would probably include Joseph. Incidentally, the fact that this would have been horribly scandalous points to its truth. None of the New Testament epistles, which had already been written, mentions Jesus’ virgin birth. It’s not part of Paul or Peter or John’s theology. And yet both Matthew and Luke make a point of telling us about it. They could have

left it out, wanting to avoid scandalising the faith, but they don’t because it’s the truth. And so Mary’s in a very difficult position—or at least what would be a difficult position for most of us. But look at her response in verse 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.

Mary responds to God’s election and calling in faith. This may mean losing her husband. It will almost certainly result in a loss of her good reputation. But she submits to God—she refers to herself as his servant—and she trusts in him for vindication. Mary represents the way that humanity should respond to God’s call. Despite having everything, Eve questioned God’s goodness, trusted in her own ability to take care of herself, and as a result she disobey God and introduced sin into the world. Mary, in contrast, has nothing, hears God and trusts him to care for her and to provide what is good despite everything about this situation looking bad from her limited human perspective.

To underscore the *virgin* birth, Luke contrasts what Mary does after the angel left with what Zechariah had done. Zechariah went home to his wife and she conceived. Mary now leaves her home, leaves behind Joseph in Nazareth, and makes the four or five day journey to the hill country to visit Elizabeth, where she stays for three months. Mary hadn’t had marital relations with Joseph and for the next three months she distances herself from him and during that time she becomes pregnant.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (Luke 1:39-45)

When Elizabeth and Mary meet, we’re told that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and the unborn John leaped for joy in her womb. This has been the Spirit’s ministry all along and a ministry that continues today: he gives recognition of the Messiah. We don’t know if John was conscious of what was going on or not, but in the power of the Spirit and as the forerunner of the Messiah, he announces the one for whom he has been chosen to prepare the way. It’s a remarkable scene. Mary had expressed her faith as she submitted herself obediently and humbly to God. Now Elizabeth shouts aloud in faith, affirming that the Messiah—the Lord—has come and—probably singing—expresses her joy at the fulfilment of everything Israel had been hoping for so long.

And in response, Luke tells us that Mary “said”. Actually, Mary “*sang*”. The words that Luke records are poetry. They’re the words we know as the Magnificat and that we sing at Evening Prayer. Mary’s song is one of the best known in Christendom. It’s been chanted quietly and solemnly, sung to the accompaniment of pipe organs, and even set to grand orchestral music by Bach. We don’t know if Mary was the sort of girl to sing it out spontaneously as she danced a jig with Elizabeth or if this was a poem she quietly penned during those three months she spent in reflection in Elizabeth’s home, but

whatever the case, they are Mary's song of praise to the God who had finally come to fulfil his promises and redeem his people. We see how steeped she was in Scripture. She draws on the language of the psalms and the prophets—words that the people of her day went to looking for hope.

**“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my
Savior,
for he has looked on the humble
estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great
things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear
him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his
arm;
he has scattered the proud in the
thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty
from their thrones
and exalted those of humble
estate;
he has filled the hungry with good
things,
and the rich he has sent away
empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring
forever.”** (Luke 1:46-55)

Mary's praise springs from the deep inside: her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in response to the grace that God has poured out on her. She praises her mighty God who has done great things and as she anticipates the redemption that will come through Jesus. Israel was full of impious people, but finally the lowly and those who “fear him” will be vindicated. His mercy is for them. The Greek word that Luke uses for “mercy” translates a powerful word from the Old Testament. It's the

Hebrew word *hesed*; it's a word with no English equivalent, but one we often translate as “loving-kindness”. It's a word that expresses God's perpetual and unfailing mercy for those who wait on him. From “generation to generation” it continues and never fades and now, here in Jesus, that loving-kindness is coming to full fruit; it's coming to a people who had held onto their hope and faith that God would vindicate and redeem them. In Jesus God will cast down the proud and send the rich away empty. Mary, like other Jews of her days, was thinking of men like Herod and those who had sold out to the Romans, but as she'll see, Jesus' ministry of casting down the proud will go much further than that. And she praises God in faith knowing that as he has shown his loving-kindness to a poor girl like her, he will exalt the humble and fill the hungry with good things. He will do all this, she recalls, because it's what he had promised to Abraham and because this has been the hope of Israel from time immemorial.

Mary's song is a celebration of God. In the Creed each week we recite an affirmation of our faith in the events that Luke tells us about here: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ” and that “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man.” Dear friends, never let those words just be a line of dry, crusty, old theology that we express. The next time you recite them, think of Elizabeth and Mary dancing and singing for joy over God's mighty and miraculous irruption into history and of Mary's humble, faithful, and joyful submission to his good will. Think of God coming to his rebellious creatures to shower us with his never-ceasing loving-kindness that we might be forgiven and restored to his presence. In Mary we see what happens when God's grace enters the world. Tom Wright says:

Mary is...the supreme example of what always happens when God is at

work by grace through human beings. God's power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.³

Think about that, brothers and sisters. Consider that as the Holy Spirit came upon Mary at the conception of Jesus, he came upon his Church at Pentecost to breathe new life into her—into those people who had believed the apostles' proclamation of Good News and who took hold of it by faith in the waters of Baptism. God continues to pour out his loving-kindness from generation to generation, his Holy Spirit has come upon us and given us new life, and in his election and calling of us, he has called us to take part in redemptive history just as he has called all his saints, from Abraham and Mary to you and me. Let us, like Mary, kneel before the Lord as his servants, ready to let it be to us according to his Word, knowing in faith that what is unthinkable to us is being made possible by the power of God.

Let us pray: We thank you, Lord, that in sending your Son to be born of the Blessed Virgin Mary you sent your redemption to us. But we thank you too for the display of your almighty power in her and for the example of faith she gives us. As we receive the Saviour, let us also live with the faith of Mary, ready to say “yes” to your election and calling and ready ourselves to take up the roles you have for us in the story of redemption. We ask this through Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

³ *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 11.