

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,* ²⁷ *to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.* ²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.* ³⁰ *But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."* ³¹ *You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.* ³² *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,* ³³ *and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

³⁴ *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

³⁵ *The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."* ³⁶ *Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.* ³⁷ *For nothing is impossible with God."*

³⁸ *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."* *Then the angel left her.*

Marvel at the Miracles of Christmas

At Christmastime, we hope for miracles. We long for them. We want, at this time of year more than at any other, to believe in miracles. Look at your TV. Scan your memories of old movies. From *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Miracle on 34th Street* to *The Santa Clause*, we want to believe that there's something more out there. We want to believe that something extraordinary could break into our drab, mundane lives at any moment and make something special happen.

And so it is appropriate that we, only days before Christmas now, should hear about real miracles. They do happen, you see. When God is involved, extraordinary things do happen. The miraculous intrudes. And people like you and me are blessed. Today, look at Luke chapter one with me, and Marvel at the Miracles of Christmas.

That the Son of God became man

This section of the Bible begins in a way that does not immediately get us thinking "miracle." The locale? Nazareth, a little town in the region of Galilee. For a blue-blooded Jew, Galilee was second-class territory; too many Gentiles up there. And Nazareth was not even the biggest or most important city in the region. The people? Joseph, a local man. He was a descendant of the great Israelite king, David, but David's line was all but totally gone. It didn't look as if any more kings would sprout up out of that family. Joseph had a fiancée. Her name was Mary. If the custom of the day applied in this case, Mary was many years younger than Joseph, in all likelihood only a teenager. Lowly people. Ordinary people. Ordinary circumstances.

But then the miraculous intrudes. “Greetings, highly favored one! The Lord is with you!” God sends to this town, to this virgin, an angel. The angel appears to Mary, this ordinary girl.

Luke wryly reports, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. I guess so! It’s not every day that an angel appears to you and says hi! After her initial shock, Mary wonders (wouldn’t we too?) where all this is going.

What’s striking in what comes next is the matter-of-factness of what Gabriel says. Let me paraphrase. “You will become pregnant. You will give birth to a son. You will give him the name Jesus. He will be great. He will be not only your Son, but also the Son of the Most High God, the ruler of the universe. He will be the fulfillment of prophecies uttered thousands of years ago, like the one spoken to the David, the greatest king in the history of God’s people. David, powerful though he was, could not bring about the fulfillment of these promises. But God is now, inside you. This child that you will bear, Mary, will rule as a king like no other king ever before—his reign will never end. In short, the history of the human race, of the planet earth, is about to grow into a grand crescendo, and it’s all going to happen in an area about this big, inside your body. Okay?”

Easy for him to say! Gabriel had an advantage over Mary here, and over us. He was a holy angel of God, a mighty spirit being who stood in the presence of God the Most High. Gabriel knew the power behind the promises of God, the power that we tend to forget about or to disbelieve. And so Gabriel speaks matter-of-factly, saying simply that these miraculous things will happen. Nothing is impossible with God. To God, the extraordinary is ordinary, the miraculous mundane.

The miracle that Gabriel announced was that of the Son of the Most High was about to become a man, a real human being like us. Imagine that! The eternal Son of God, the one who fills heaven and earth, was coming to live in a few cells in the uterus of a teenage girl. “If you want to get the hang of it,” wrote C.S. Lewis, “think of how you would like to become a slug or a crab.” That’s about it. Jesus willingly set aside his divine power and glory to be conceived in a human womb.

And all for us. It was to be our Savior, the Savior we needed, that Jesus did all this. More on this later.

That Jesus was born of a virgin

Mary was probably high school age, but she didn’t have the benefit of fourth period biology to teach her about the human reproductive system. Nevertheless, she knows how things work, and so she asks a question of Gabriel. “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

Gabriel kind of answers Mary’s question, yet at the same time he doesn’t. Here’s what Gabriel says: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.” He doesn’t pull out a wall chart like those we had in my high school biology classroom and explain to Mary how this conception will take place. Instead, Gabriel simply says that the power of the Most High will be at work. The Holy Spirit will make this happen. Nothing is impossible with God. If God wants to supercede the laws of nature, he can, for he invented nature. In short, this virgin birth will be a miracle.

This wasn’t the first time the Lord had brought about a miracle conception. It was the first and only virgin birth, of course. But only six months before Gabriel came to Mary he had come to her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were old, well past childbearing age. Plus, the couple had never been able to have children. Nevertheless, the angel Gabriel had come to Zechariah and told him that he and Elizabeth would soon have a son to be named

John (later called John the Baptist). And sure enough, nine months later, there he was. God had done a miracle.

Miracle conceptions are a hallmark of God's working. Go way back to Abraham. God had given 100-year-old Abraham and his 90-year-old wife Sarah a miracle baby in their old age. How fitting that God would bring his own Son into the world through the virgin Mary and the miracle birth *par excellence*.

Now, people have tried to explain away the virgin birth in many different ways. Many people nowadays believe that there was no virgin birth at all. They think that Mary became pregnant by some unknown man and that this story was concocted by embarrassed Christians to cover that up. Other people look for some more reasonable, more logical explanation as to how Mary conceived. In response to that, we could try to argue our point of view or come up with reasonable explanations of our own. And, to be sure, sometimes we need to do some of that, defending the truths of Christianity against spurious and false allegations. But finally, the only satisfactory explanation of a virgin conceiving is that a miracle happened. God decided to go over and above the way things naturally work and do something miraculous. In the end, we must simply tell the truth with gentleness and respect and let God do the convincing.

Which brings us to our third miracle...

That anyone believes these things

Before we go on, I should come clean. The outline for today's sermon is borrowed from a comment made by Martin Luther, who recalled an observation made by two early Christian theologians. (All these men have been in heaven for a few hundred years, so I don't think they mind me borrowing ideas from them!) These men noticed three miracles in this section. The first two we have thought about: that the Son of God became man and that Jesus was born of a virgin. The third miracle we see in Mary's reaction to what Gabriel tells her. After Gabriel finishes speaking to Mary, here's how she responds: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Gabriel says that the Son of God will become a man and be born of Mary, and Mary essentially says, "Okay." That's the third miracle—that Mary can believe what God tells her.

Sure, we could say that Mary was a simple, uneducated girl from an unsophisticated era—that that's why she accepted the words of Gabriel. But give her some credit. A virgin birth was as outlandish back then as it is today. It wasn't Mary's naivete that led her to believe that what was told to her would actually happen. It was God himself convincing her. Through the Scriptures that Mary knew well, God had brought his power to her heart, soul and mind. And when Gabriel spoke God's message to Mary, God was working the miracle of faith within her.

That's still how it happens today. People who believe that the eternal Son of God became fully human, people who believe that Jesus was born of a virgin—we are not stupider or wiser than those who don't believe such truths. Rather, a miracle has happened within us. It is the miracle of faith.

God does this miracle not by offering rock-solid logical proofs, but through a simple message that is utter foolishness on its face. The message is this: through someone named Jesus, who was once born as a baby, we have pardon and peace with the eternal God.

That leads us to contemplate a miracle we dare not overlook, the miracle of the love of God. Jesus was doing all this, being conceived in the womb of a virgin, so that he could be a real person like us. As a human being, Jesus would be obligated to obey all the laws of God. Why would he want to obey all the laws that he himself had given to the human race? Because we have failed to obey them as God commanded. Jesus was born of a virgin, untainted by the sin that is passed down through human fathers. He was completely without sin from the very beginning, and as our substitute lived a life without sin.

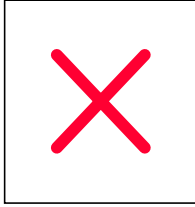
Another reason Jesus took on human flesh was so that eventually he could use that flesh and blood to feel excruciating pain and to die. Why would he want to suffer and die? So that we human beings would not have to. With the body that began in the womb of the virgin Mary, Jesus would suffer the punishment for the sins of the world, including your sins and mine. Then, with that same body, he would be raised to life again, proving that there is real life after death—life for you and for me. Love, the love that drove Jesus to do all this for us—this love is nothing short of miraculous.

Luther sums it up well: “It is a great consolation for us that divine majesty became flesh and blood, and an even greater consolation if we can believe this happened *for us*. We merely talk, but if a prince for my sake were to go to prison, should I not see he loved me and should I not be beside myself? Such an outward thing is nothing compared with what God, who has all things in his hand, has done.”

Many people missed the miracles of the first Christmas. They were looking for the Christ to come, but in a spectacular way to usher in a messianic golden age. They weren’t looking for miracles in a little town in the home of a teenage girl or in a manger or a stable. And so they missed the miracles.

Don’t miss the miracles this Christmas. Look for them. They happen. But look where God does the miracles—not in the places we’d expect. Look in a manger. Look on a cross. Look in an empty grave. Look in a church. Look at a bowl of water. Look at some wine and bread. Listen to ordinary sounding words spoken by ordinary looking people. Look in human hearts changed by a simple message of grace.

Look for miracles in ordinary places. For to God, the ordinary is extraordinary, the mundane miraculous. Look at this Jesus. Listen to his word. Marvel at the miracles, especially the greatest miracle of all: the saving love of God. Amen.



- **Text: Luke 1:26-38**
Advent 4, 1996
Holy Trinity - Hacienda Heights, CA

In Nomine Iesu

or nothing is impossible with God. (Luke 1:37)

The first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke focuses on two important women in the Bible: Elizabeth - a woman probably in her sixties or seventies, well past her years of child bearing, and Mary - a young girl, probably no more than a teenager, engaged to a man named Joseph. Both of them are pregnant. Of the two, Elizabeth's pregnancy seems the more unlikely and miraculous to us. Unmarried pregnant teenagers were not unheard of in Mary's day, nor are they in ours. Pregnant senior citizens were quite another matter. But as it turns out, Mary is a virgin, making her pregnancy even more remarkable than that of her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth would give birth to John the Baptizer, the forerunner of the Christ. And six months later, Mary would give birth to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior. "

For nothing is impossible with God."

Before there is a birth, there must first be a conception. And so it is also appropriate today on the 4th Sunday of Advent, on the threshold of Christmas, that we consider our Lord's being "conceived by the Holy Spirit."

We don't know the precise date that the angel intruded on Mary and her wedding plans, just as we don't know for certain the date that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We do know that it was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy that St. Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth, and said, "Hail, you who are full of grace. The Lord is with you."

The timing is important. Luke has done his research, and he expects us to pay attention to the details. Six months before, the same angel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, as he was preparing the incense altar for the evening sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. Centuries before that, the angel Gabriel had appeared to Daniel at the time of the evening sacrifice to assure Daniel that the Lord would have his way and that victory ultimately would be his: "Seventy weeks are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place."

From the time that Gabriel first appeared to Zechariah next to the incense altar in the temple to the time that Jesus first appeared in the temple is exactly 15 months and 40 days, or 490 days, or seventy weeks. I realize that this sort of biblical mathematics won't warm hearts as much as chestnuts roasting on an open fire, but

when God has the final and decisive victory of righteousness over sin, everything proceeds according to schedule to remind us that "nothing is impossible with God."

This was, in the words of St. Paul, the "fullness of time," the moment when time was filled to overflowing, when history was pregnant with the Promise, that God sent His Son to be born of a woman, to be born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the law and in bondage to sin and could not free themselves. The Promise had been spoken by God in the Garden, in the hearing of Adam and Eve, in view of their own disobedience that brought darkness and death. The Promise was that God would make war between the devil and the woman, that through the Offspring of the woman God would crush the head of the serpent and in the process would suffer the crushing of his own heel. The Promise was carried by a long line of Israel's mothers who carried the promise: Sarah, Rebekkah, Leah, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and a whole host of nameless women who carried the promised heal-bruised Devil-crusher to full term.

At the end of that long list of Israel's mothers is Mary, the young maiden of Nazareth. She is a descendent of David, the branch of Jesse's family tree who, in the fullness of God's time, bore one perfect flower, our Lord Jesus Christ. Mary stands as the counterpart of Eve, at the opposite end of God's promise to save His fallen creatures. Eve had listened to the Lie of the devil and had been deceived; Mary hearkened to the Promise, and she conceived.

In a very real sense, Mary became pregnant by way of her ears. She heard the Word of God. She heard the Promise proclaimed by the prophets, spoken by the angel:

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

In the words of the angel we hear the ancient echoes of the Promise: "A virgin will conceive and bear a son and they will call his name Immanuel."

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore."

We hear the Promise to David: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

Mary heard that Promise of God, and the Word of Promise became Flesh and made

His dwelling among us. All the promises of God find their "yes," their "amen," in this Child of Mary. "For nothing is impossible with God.

Mary's virgin motherhood is a controversial thing today. It is an embarrassment to the sophisticated; foolish nonsense to the learned; a "childish myth" to those who do not believe that anything is possible with God. We have come to believe that with us nothing is impossible, given enough time, technology, and working capital. There is little room left in our hearts and minds to ponder the reality of a pregnant virgin. And we have become far too sexually cynical - in a day when three out of four couples live together before their wedding day - to find much delight in the innocence of a teenage girl who is able to ask, "How shall this be, since I have not slept with a man?"

The angel offers no explanations to satisfy our modern curiosity. "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." This is entirely the creative working of God. Through the Word, by the Holy Spirit, a young woman conceives without a man and gives birth to a Son, who is the Holy One, Immanuel, God with us.

It was a singular and special day in history, the day the angel came to Mary and proclaimed the Promise. On that day in Nazareth of Galilee, in a young girl named Mary, God became human, the Creator became the creature, the Word became Flesh. A tiny cluster of human cells in the womb of Mary, something our culture dismisses as "fetal tissue," holds the very Lord of the universe, the eternal Word of God through whom all things were made. The infinite Son of God is contained in the finite womb of the Virgin; the fullness of God dwells in the smallness of a fetus.

See how far God reaches down to be with us! See what lengths God will go to save us! While we are busy trying to reach up to God, trying to be gods and asserting ourselves as gods over each other, God humbly, quietly, and gently reaches down to us, to be one of us, to unite Himself with us in our suffering and sin, to be Immanuel, God with us. From conception to grave, from the womb to the tomb, God is with us in this humble and holy Child conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit.

It is right that Christians have called blessed Mary, the "mother of God" or "God-bearer." The angel will permit us to call her nothing less. Mary is the virgin mother of the Holy One, the Son of the Most High. And in saying that we are not elevating Mary, we are honoring Christ. To deny Mary's virginity is to deny that God is Jesus' Father, that Jesus is true God, God's only Son. If Mary is not a virgin mother, then her Son is only a man, and his death is simply the death of a man, and not the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. To deny Mary's virginity is also to deny that Jesus is without sin. Sin is an inherited condition, passed down from Adam from father to child. But Jesus was conceived without a human father. He is a "virgin's Offspring, pure and fresh" - conceived and born sinless so that He might become sin for us. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might

become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21)

Just as damaging is the denial Mary's motherhood. This is done more often by ignoring Mary than denying her. Just because we don't pray to her doesn't mean we don't thank God for her. To deny Mary's motherhood is to deny our Lord's humanity, that Jesus is our fully human brother, our Substitute under the Law, who came to keep the Law perfectly in our place, to die our death under the Law.

To deny Mary's motherhood is also to deny that God works through means. The Savior didn't simply appear out of nowhere like the ubiquitous alien invader from outer space in a science fiction movie. God entered this world in the ordinary way, by ordinary means, the way you and I came into the world. He was conceived and carried for nine months; he was born, and grew up, and worked, and suffered, and bled, and died, and was buried. And He deals with us in that same ordinary, creaturely, human way. We don't reach up to Him, He comes down to us through the spoken and written Word, through the water of Baptism, through the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, through men whom He calls to be pastors, through the Church. The One who came in human flesh and blood, deals with us in a flesh and blood way. "For nothing is impossible with God."

To remember the Virgin Mary is to be reminded of our mother in faith, the Church. As the Large Catechism puts it, she is "the mother that begets all believers through the Word." We may not be accustomed to speaking like that. Perhaps that's why we so easily forget and neglect mother Church. Like Mary, the Church too is full of grace and the Lord is with her. As Mary heard the Word and conceived a Child, so the Church hears the the Promise of salvation through the death and resurrection of Mary's Son, and she conceives and bears her children - children who are born again from above in Holy Baptism, "children born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but born of God." We are witnesses once again today of such a miraculous birth. A little one born of a mother and father now has a second set of parents and a new and heavenly birth. She now can claim God as her Father and the Church as her mother. She, like all the baptized, is virgin born. "Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary said, "yes." We must acknowledge this, and thank God for it. The angel would not leave until Mary had given her assent. "I am the Lord's servant," she said. "May it be to me according to your word." Her "yes" doesn't make Mary an assistant savior or a co-redeemer. The Savior and Redeemer is the Child conceived in her. She is the Lord's humble servant. Nor may we use Mary's yes to suggest that there is some cooperation, some decision, some "yes" on our part, in our salvation. This is not Mary's conversion. She was already full of grace long before the angel came to her. Mary's "yes" is faith's "amen," that the Word of God would have its way with her. It is her "thy will be done" that puts her at the Lord's disposal, to be His servant, to do the work God gave her to do.

Did Mary fully realize all that her "yes" would mean? Could she have known how

scandalous her virgin motherhood would be to her neighbors, that even Joseph, her fiancé, would doubt her and seek to divorce her? Could she have known that she would have to deliver her Child away from the comforts of home, and cradle him in an animal's feeding trough? That she and Joseph would have to flee to Egypt to protect this Child from murderous King Herod? That she would stand at the foot of a cross and watch that precious life that was conceived in her that day be given into death for her and for the sin of the world? Mary could not have known all of that. But she simply trusted God's Promise, "for with God nothing is impossible."

We do not know everything that lies in the future for us, whether next year, or in the years ahead. We don't know what suffering, trials, temptations are in store for us. We don't know if we will be sick or healthy in the coming year, prosperous or poor. We don't know what our being servants of the Lord will mean for us, or how the cross will come to us, though you can be sure the cross will come. We don't know the time and circumstances of our own death. Nor do we know the hour or day of the Lord's coming in glory and our resurrection from the dead

But we do know this one thing on this 4th Sunday of Advent: Amazing things happen where God speaks His Word of promise. A virgin conceives and bears a son. Sins are forgiven in the name of Jesus. Sinners are washed and reborn as baptized saints. The Body and Blood which were born of Mary, crucified, raised, and glorified, are given out as a Supper for sinners to eat and to drink. The dead are raised to life. "For nothing is impossible with God."

Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

Advent IV (B)

Mary's Catechesis -- The Annunciation

Dr. A. A. Just Jr.

One of the surprises for many of us as we read the first chapter of Luke's Gospel is the prominent place of Mary in the story of Jesus' birth. This humble virgin from Nazareth is the mother of God! Mary appears as an Old Testament saint who received the good news from the angel that God was working in her a miracle that would bring about the re-creation of the world. And Luke describes her in language reserved in the Old Testament for Israel. Like Israel, Mary is described as the daughter of Zion for she is the new locale for God's presence, the new temple where God's holiness will dwell. What a miracle! And this is not because of who Mary is, but because of what God is doing in Mary to bring about his plans of salvation.

A Jewish hearer of Luke's Gospel would be struck how Jewish Luke's Gospel sounds, and how Jewish it appears as the narrative unfolds. Luke begins by introducing us to two aged Old Testament saints, Zechariah and Elizabeth. The miraculous

circumstances of John's birth recalls the miraculous birth of Isaac to two aged saints, Abraham and Sarah. And what could be more Jewish than the liturgical rhythm of the temple with its sacrificial offerings!

The angel greets this insignificant virgin from Nazareth who scholars estimate could be no older than 15 years old! In the announcement from the angel Gabriel Mary learns what God is doing to redeem our lost and fallen race. This is **Mary's catechesis**, that is, where the Lord speaks to her through the angel about the miraculous child she will conceive in her womb by the Holy Spirit, and where she echoes back in humble trusting faith, "let it be to me according to your word."

The Setting for her Catechesis

The announcement to Mary is the climax of Luke's first chapter. The evangelist sets the scene by introducing the circumstances of this miraculous event. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a virgin betrothed to Joseph of the house of David, in Nazareth of Galilee during the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Here begins a movement in the infancy narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem, a preview of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week.

John and Jesus are paralleled throughout the first chapter of Luke, and this may be most clearly seen in the comparison between Zechariah, the father of John, and Mary. Zechariah is described in great detail -- he is a Levite and a priest, considered among his peers as righteous and blameless. In contrast, very little is said about Mary herself except her relationship to Joseph with whom she is betrothed, who is of the house of David, anticipating a major part of the angel's announcement. Mary's insignificance and her humble circumstances are arresting, and the only significant piece of information is her status as "virgin," which is repeated twice to emphasize this miraculous status. Mary's humble status will be emphasized in the Magnificat as a means to describe the nature of the incarnation and the kingdom of the incarnate one. Her virginity stands in contrast to Elizabeth's barrenness, which is used as a sign to Mary that the angel's announcement is true (1:36).

The action of the announcement to Mary by the angel is also very simple. The angel comes to Mary to greet her as the "Daughter of Zion" and tell her that she will soon bear within her body the presence of the Lord because of the Lord's gracious action. Mary is deeply troubled by the word and greeting of the angel. The angel alleviates her fear by stating that Mary's status comes from God which is why she has found favor with him. The miraculous birth is announced!

The Content of catechesis is about Jesus Christ

The greeting of the angel to Mary is simply "the Lord be with you." The Lord is with Mary in two senses. He will come upon her and overshadow her and the presence of the Lord will be in her womb. Mary as the Daughter of Zion begins the new era of salvation with her conception. Luke contrasts this to Zechariah and Elizabeth whose son John the Baptist is born according to the old era with its laws and regulations. The new era of salvation must come through the womb of Mary, and this may only happen through the

gracious action of God upon Mary who finds favor with God because God chooses to bestow his favor on her.

Is this not the same with us as we are incorporated into the kingdom by the pure grace of God, and therefore, is this not the same with the church, which is where faith is born by the pure grace of God? As Eve contained in her womb all humanity that was doomed to sin, now Mary contains in her womb a new humanity that is promised grace because of her Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, the angel must say "rejoice" for Israel is now reborn through Mary's womb. The Lord is with Mary -- he is with his church!

Mary is instructed by the angel concerning the child she will conceive and bear. *This is her catechesis!* Titles for this child abound: he is called Jesus, Son of the Most High, King, and Son of God. For the hearer of Luke's Gospel, there should be no doubt at this point who the Gospel is the subject of this Gospel. Although Luke does not give us the meaning of the name "Jesus" (1:31), Matthew does: "He who will save his people from their sins" (1:21). The Old Testament equivalent is Joshua, i.e. deliverer, savior. It sums up both the person and work of the Messiah. John the Baptist will be "great before the Lord" (1:15), but Jesus is Great, the Son of the Most High (1:32).

Luke describes the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary as a day to be marked, for on this day the kingdom comes because Jesus is a continuation of the Davidic line. All the promises of God in the Old Testament are now coming to fulfillment in Christ, and specifically the promise of an everlasting kingdom to the house of David: "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will be King over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33). The royal line of the kingdom of Judah, prophesied by Jacob (Genesis 49), merges with the royal line of David (2 Samuel 7): "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever." Jesus is now a King who will reign over the house of David because the messianic and kingly succession now continues here in Jesus.

Mary as the first catechumen teaches us about the Lord

The climax of the angel's words is the announcement that the virgin will conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary asks the angel, "How will this be, since I know not a man?" and the angel announces to her that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." This same Spirit hovered over the waters and brought forth creation (Gen 1:2), over Israel as the presence of God in the pillar of cloud (the shekinah) during the exodus (Ex 13; 14; 33), over the ark of the covenant (Ex 40), at Sinai (Ex 19), over Jesus at his baptism (Lk 3), and in the cloud at his transfiguration (Lk 9). This same Spirit will also be promised to the disciples by Jesus just before his ascension when they will be "clothed with power from on high" (24:49). As the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and overshadows her, she conceives Jesus as holy, the Son of God. This is the climactic moment of the incarnation of our Lord!

Luther always maintained that the conception of Jesus came through the power of God's word in Mary's ear. She heard the word from the angel and conceived the child.

Mary is truly the first catechumen here, since catechumens were called "hearers of the word." This child conceived in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit is the incarnate presence of God, greater than Isaac or Samuel, greater than his cousin John, as all the titles indicate. "Holy" and "Son of God" are the final titles given to Jesus. At Jesus' baptism and again at his transfiguration the Father will confirm that Jesus is "my beloved Son," telling us what we already know from Jesus' conception.

The Annunciation to the virgin Mary teaches us about the virgin birth, Jesus as the Son of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception. Thus the Nicene Creed captures all this teaching in a single phrase: Jesus "was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man." As "Son of God" and "holy," Jesus is set apart by God to cleanse Israel -- and all of us -- from our sins and to inherit for us the kingdom promised by the Father.

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary reminds us of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism. When the power of the most high overshadows her, God becomes incarnate -- becomes flesh -- as part of her flesh, reminding us of the reception of the body and blood of Christ into the believer's body in the Lord's Supper. If so, the announcement to Mary is our first glimpse of the pattern of incorporation into the church that will be followed throughout Luke-Acts and in the early Christian communities: catechesis, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Mary prefigures this as she receives catechesis from the angel (1:31b-34), the Holy Spirit comes upon her (1:35a), and she receives the flesh of Christ (1:35b).

Mary is the mother of God, and also the first catechumen. She sets the pattern for all who will follow her. "With God nothing is impossible." So Mary rejoices as the one favored by God to become the flesh-and-blood home of his incarnate Son. The Lord is with her indeed! By calling herself "the servant of the Lord," she humbly submits herself to God's word and to his miraculous presence with her and in her body. Mary serves as a model of the humble hearing of God's Word and the trusting response of faith created by that Word -- the Word now made flesh in her womb.

Mary's catechesis is catechesis for the church

The Church celebrates "The Annunciation" to the virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel about the virgin birth of Jesus on March 25th. In ancient times, March 25th was considered the first day of the new year, for many thought that on this day the creation of the world began. As early as the third century, many early Christian communities also thought that this was the day Christ was crucified, since it was possible for that first Good Friday to fall at the end of March. This united the creation and the redemption in the minds of the ancient church. And it was not difficult for those early Christians to take the next logical step, that is, to suggest that Christ died on the day he was conceived. This is the reason why many believe that Christmas is celebrated on December 25th, nine months after Jesus' conception and crucifixion.

Even though the early Christians had no solid evidence for all this, the theological consequences are intriguing. Isn't the Annunciation the day when God comes into this world, and shouldn't it be as much a major festival as Christmas or Easter? Didn't early

Christians believe all this about the dates precisely because they held the annunciation of Christ's conception to Mary in as high esteem as they did the birth of the child and the death of child? These early Christian communities believed that in the world's history there were four great days, all of which were on par with one another -- the day God created the world, the day God came into this world, the day God offered Himself up as the sacrifice for sins, and the day that God showed he was final conqueror over sin, death, and the devil by rising from the tomb.

The angel Gabriel visited Mary on the second day, the day God proved that in spite of our continual rebellion against him he loved us. It was natural for early Christians to celebrate the conception of Jesus and death of Jesus on the same day. The suggestion that the Annunciation and not Christmas is the first celebration of the incarnation is affirmed by the Nicene creed which simply states, "who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man." The significant divine action was in Nazareth, as the Holy Spirit came upon the humble virgin and the power of the Most high overshadowed her. For it was in Nazareth where the Word was made flesh.

But what might Luke say about all this? He too describes the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary as a day to be marked, a day that could be described as a festival of Christ, for on this day the old meets the new. All the promises of God in the OT are now coming to fulfillment in Christ. John prepares his way, calling Israel to repent of its unbelief, to repent of its rejection of God's plan of salvation in the promised Messiah. And with hearts cleansed through a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John calls Israel to look up to the holy city of Jerusalem where this Jesus will give up his life late one March afternoon. John will be great before the Lord, says Gabriel, but as Gabriel says to Mary, Jesus is the Lord, he is Great, for he is the Son of the Most High, he is given the throne of his father David, he will reign over the house of Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

The throne of David -- the house of Jacob -- the kingdom that has no end -- OT promises that turn our hearts toward Jerusalem in repentance and faith as we contemplate the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord. Jesus became the friend of all men by being made in the likeness of sinful flesh in order to redeem sinful flesh. We who thought God was our enemy and our persecutor -- we who lived in hostility to God as we wallowed in our fallenness -- we poor sinners are the reason Jesus was conceived by the power of Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary where his body, his flesh, would be offered up as an everlasting atonement and sacrifice for all sins. Jesus shared our common humanity in every way, and because this child conceived in Mary is holy, the Son of God, he is able to redeem our bodies and make them holy like his body. And because his body rose from the dead, so also will our bodies rise in the resurrection of all flesh.

What a place to stand at the beginning of Advent! To stand in Nazareth with the virgin and the angel Gabriel and look out across the life of Lord to Jerusalem and to a cross and an empty tomb. What suffering and glory to behold! And to think that the baptismal waters that flow from his death and resurrection make us his holy children wherein he dwells. And that the body and blood that flow from his sacrificial death are now received

by us in, with, and under bread and wine for the forgiveness of all our sins, for our eternal benefit.

"And 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 called holy, the Son of God.' And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."

AMEN