

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2005
Luke 1:26-38

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

With Mary, We Believe

- that a virgin can have a child
- that the virgin's son is God's Son
- that the virgin's son is my King

NIV Luke 1:26 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.

Fellow Believers,

There has been controversy for a long time in the Christian church about the role of Mary. Was she a sinless perpetual virgin who worked with her Son, Jesus, to accomplish our redemption? Is she the Queen of Heaven, our intercessor at God's throne? All these things have been posited of Mary. Protestants and Lutherans, on the other hand, have at times all but ignored Mary, save perhaps for Christmas time, when it's hard to tell the story of the birth of Christ without mentioning his mother. Already back in the 4th century, St. Ambrose was cautioning those who were taking adoration of the Virgin Mary to extremes that "Mary was the temple of God, not the God of the temple." But, then again, none other than Martin Luther continued to use the *Ave Maria* prayer, "Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,

Jesus.” Of course, the “pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death” part was not added until well after the Reformation.

There is clearly a middle ground between making Mary our co-redeemer and essentially ignoring her. Especially at Christmas time, Mary has something that all of us need. It was not something she developed on her own; it was something God gave her. That something is faith. As Mary contemplates Gabriel’s message that she is to be God’s instrument in the incarnation of his Son, she listens and then believes. The angel Gabriel came to this poor girl in Nazareth and told her of staggering miracles—mind-boggling impossibilities—and she in response believed that with God nothing is impossible. She said simply, “*May it be to me as you have said.*” God grant us the faith of Mary so that this Christmas finds us believing with Mary (1) that a virgin can have a child, (2) that the virgin’s son is God’s Son, and (3) that the virgin’s son is our King.

1. ...that a virgin can have a child

Gabriel, who six months earlier had announced the birth of John the Baptist, now has the privilege of announcing the birth of Christ. He makes this announcement in—of all places—Nazareth in Galilee, far away from the temple, far removed from Jerusalem and the leading figures of Jewish society. The one so favored as to be the mother of our Savior was Mary. We know hardly anything else about her—not even her age or the names of her parents. Think how much ink is being spilled these days to establish the credentials of a Supreme Court nominee, and here the mother of God is identified for the very first time and what we know of her is that her name was Mary and she lived in Nazareth. Oh, yes—and she was pledged to be married to a descendant of King David named Joseph and—this is important—she was a virgin. That’s it!

Luke tells us that Mary was already greatly troubled when Gabriel greeted her. She wondered what “*Greetings, you who are highly favored...The Lord is with you*” meant. She was soon to find out.

Here’s the first piece of startling information. The angel said, “*You will be with child and give birth to a son...*” The angel had more to say, but Mary was already wondering how this could be. True, she was pledged to be married to Joseph, but she was still a virgin. They were reserving the intimacies of marriage for the time when they were actually married. “*How will this be?*” Mary wants to know. There’s no doubt or unbelief in the question. It’s an honest response. The angel’s explanation—“*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*”—doesn’t delve into the biology behind the miracle. The Bible never does that. Gabriel’s answer simply directs her to what God can do. God can cause a virgin to become pregnant and bear a child. The Savior of the world will have a human mother, but no human father. Nothing’s impossible for God.

How many times in your life do you suppose you’ve said, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the

virgin Mary”? Does it make a difference whether Jesus was born of a virgin or whether Joseph or some other man fathered Jesus? Absolutely it does! If the Jesus we call “Savior” had a human father, then he’s not able to be our Savior. People who have both a human father and a human mother are born sinful. That’s unavoidably the case. Only if Jesus “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,” as we confess in the Nicene Creed, can he have been sinless from the moment of his conception. Then he can be the high priest who meets our need—“**holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.**” (Heb. 7:26) This Christmas, as you sing, “*Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright, Round yon virgin mother and child*” pray that God will give you a faith like Mary’s, that is, a faith that doesn’t doubt or disbelieve, but simply says, “**May it be to me as the Lord has said.**”

But Gabriel had still more to tell Mary. This wasn’t simply going to be a case of a virgin having a child. This child would be no ordinary child.

2. ...that the virgin’s son is God’s Son

Listen to how Gabriel speaks of Mary’s child: “*You are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*” Later, the angel says, “*So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*”

If this doesn’t come across as startling information to you, it’s only because you’ve heard it so often. Imagine what it’s like to hear for the very first time—as a newly expectant mother—that your child is the Son of God! The prophet Isaiah said of the Christ that he is “**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**” (9:6) The prophet Micah says his “**origins are from of old, from ancient times.**” (5:2) In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul in writing to the Colossians, says of Christ, “**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created.**” (1:15-16) This newly conceived life in Mary’s womb rightly lays claim to every attribute of God the Father: omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, except that he has veiled his majesty in a servant’s form, humbling himself to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

I can’t begin to tell you how this took place. We’re dealing with one of the magnificent mysteries of our faith here. “**The Word became flesh.**” “God with us.” Is this necessary? Not if all you want from Jesus is lessons in moral living. Not if Jesus is simply a good teacher. Then you don’t need Mary’s child to be the Son of God. But if you’ve got sins that need forgiving, if gotten a glimpse of the hell your sins have earned you, and if you’ve figured out that you’re powerless to pull off your own escape, then you’ll rejoice to know that Mary’s child is the Son of the Most High. Then one drop of the blood he shed at the cross is sufficient to cover your sins and mine and the sins of everyone in the world. Only God can do that. Nothing is impossible with God. “*May it be to me as you have said.*”

To this point we've spoken of some inexplicable acts of God: the virgin birth and incarnation of his Son. But these great truths of our faith will profit us nothing without faith that this virgin-born Son of God in human flesh is our King. Saving faith not only correctly identifies Jesus as the holy Son of God, but it also relies on him as King and Savior.

3. ...*the virgin's Son is my King*

Gabriel also had this to say about Mary's son: "*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.*" Don't let the Jewish terminology in which this is couched throw you. We non-Jews have a vital interest in knowing whether God's promise to David that his kingdom would endure forever has been fulfilled. This king is our King.

You see, to Jewish minds, the concepts of king and Savior were inseparable. A king worthy of the title wasn't just king for his own sake, for his own enjoyment and advancement. He was king for the good of his people. Their welfare was his first concern. It's true that Israel had never had a king who was perfectly able to put the welfare of his people first. Even the good kings failed in some respects at that. Think of David's costly lapses. And the bad kings were spectacular failures in that regard. Instead of making it safe to be a believer, they made it dangerous. Add to this the fact that when Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth there hadn't been a descendant of David on the throne of Israel for the better part of 600 years. But God had promised an ideal King, a Branch from Jesse's stump, who would rule with justice and be our righteousness. This King would conquer our enemies and bring us peace. His name says it. His name is Jesus, Savior.

Eight days after Jesus was born, when it was time to circumcise him, Joseph and Mary formally gave their child the name Jesus. It was the name the angel had given them. Giving him that name was no mere formality; it was an act of faith in their part. It was their acknowledgement that Mary's son was their Savior and King. We need the same faith. As we look into the manger God invites each of us to see there a King who was born to die and live for me. My Savior.

So what should we do with Mary? The answer is neither to worship her nor to ignore her. The answer lies in between. Mary is a wonderful example of faith. God's angel told her startling, mind-boggling things that were going to affect her in a very personal way. Though a virgin, she would bear child. This child would be the Son of God. This child would be her King and Savior. And after she heard what the angel had to say, she believed. Nothing is impossible for God. May it be to me as you have said! May our faith be like hers! Amen.