

An Unbelievable Message
Luke 1:26-38
by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Luke 1:26-38 (ESV)

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²He 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, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵And 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

- Luke 1:26-38, ESV

What's the Best Unexpected News You Ever Got?

I grew up dreaming that someday, Publisher's Clearinghouse would knock on our family's door and present us with a giant check. I remember filling out the sweepstakes entry form, which I remember involved putting stickers on a sheet of paper. Now, I say that remember growing up dreaming about the Publishers Clearinghouse Prize Patrol, but those commercials didn't begin airing until I was almost 15 years old, so I guess it was just my last couple of years of high school.

Anyway, needless to say, the Publishers Clearinghouse Prize Patrol never showed up to present my family with a giant check. I have had lots of other great surprises in my life. When I was 20 years old, Beth's roommate called me and asked if I would be willing to take Beth out on her 18th birthday to get her out of the dorm at UMBC so they could set up the room for a surprise birthday party. She asked me to bring her back to the room at around 9:30. I told her I would gladly ask Beth out, but as we had not yet officially been out on a date, I wasn't sure if she would say yes. Her roommate said, "Oh, she'll say yes." And that was one of the best pieces of information I've ever received in my life. I asked her out, and the day after tomorrow will mark 29 years since that first official date on her 18th birthday.

No matter what unexpected news you've gotten in your life, it can't compare with what is before us this morning:

Over 2,000 years ago, a teenage girl in a very small, obscure village in the Middle East was given the absolute best and most unexpected news in the history of the world. We've all heard the story so many times that we're likely to think of it as predictable, expected, and maybe a little bit boring. Yeah, we know – a young woman who's never been with a man is visited by an archangel and told she's going to become miraculously pregnant and give birth to the Son of God, the Savior of the World, the Messiah from David's line that God's people have been waiting for for 1,000 years. But, you see, Mary had never read the Christmas story before. She had never been to a live nativity or seen a 5th grader playing the angel Gabriel making the announcement in a monotone mumble. For her, this was all brand-new, intensely real, terrifying, confusing, and wonderful beyond her wildest imagination.

A Troubling, Confusing Greeting, vv. 26-29

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.

Luke tells us this took place in the 6th month. The 6th month of what? Well, if you remember from last week, this is the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, six months after Gabriel had made his announcement to Zechariah in the temple. Gabriel greets Mary by telling her that she is highly favored by God – literally, one who has received much grace from God. And then Gabriel proclaims to Mary, “The Lord is with you.”

Mary is greatly troubled by what Gabriel has said to her. She doesn't understand how he could possibly be talking to her. Gabriel's greeting of Mary reminds me of how the Angel of the Lord greeted Gideon in Judges 6:

¹¹ Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. ¹² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.”

Gideon was beating out wheat in a wine press to hide from the Midianites who were oppressing Israel. Nothing about his actions or his circumstances would lead anyone to call him a mighty man of valor or to proclaim that the Lord was with him.

Similarly, Mary is an ordinary teenage girl in a very small and obscure village in a very despised part of a very despised country in the farthest corner of the Roman Empire. She is not from a wealthy family. She has no powerful political connections. Nothing about her or her circumstances would lead any outside observer to conclude that she was highly favored by God and that the Lord was with her. Even she herself could not make any sense out of these words that Gabriel said to her.

But God's word is powerful and creates what it proclaims. God calls the things that are not yet as if they already are. Gideon would become a mighty man of valor by God's empowering grace, and he would lead Israel to one of their greatest military victories in their history. Mary would soon become the most highly favored woman in the history of the world, given the greatest privilege ever given to anyone. The Lord would literally be with her, as the Son of God, the Lord incarnate, would be carried in her womb for nine months and would be held in her arms and tenderly raised by her and her husband.

We need to remember that it is what God says of us that is the ultimate truth about us, not what we think of ourselves nor what the world thinks of us. If God has been gracious to us and has adopted us as his children through faith in Jesus Christ, we, too, are highly favored by God. We are recipients of great and amazing grace. We are children of God, heirs of eternal life, and the Lord is with us always. We may not always realize that ourselves, and the world may laugh it off as some fanciful religious notion. But if God declares these things to be so, they are the truth!

A Long-Awaited Promise Fulfilled, v. 29-33

As Mary is still confused and puzzling over this greeting, Gabriel speaks even more amazing words to her:

³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²He 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, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Did you ever notice how angels almost always have to tell people to not be afraid. Angels are powerful and majestic beings, and being in their presence is terrifying for mere humans. Mary is also so stunned by what Gabriel has already said to her that she is probably trembling with fear at what might come next. And what comes next will change her life and the whole world forever.

Gabriel tells this young virgin woman that she is going to conceive and bear a son, a son named salvation. Now, Jesus was actually not an unusual name among Jewish boys. It is just a variation of the name Joshua, one of the great Old Testament heroes of the faith. Just as many Christian people today give biblical names to their sons and daughters, so in Mary's day, many Jewish families would name their sons Abraham or Joshua.

What is highly unusual is what Gabriel says about this particular Joshua or 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.” (vv. 32-33)

Mary would have heard these words as the fulfillment of the centuries old promise of God to send a Messiah to his people. It was 1,000 years before Mary’s encounter with Gabriel that God spoke to King David through the Prophet Nathan. David had wanted to build the Temple, to build a house for the Lord, but the Lord told him something shockingly gracious in return:

the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When 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. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. – 2 Samuel 7:11-14, ESV

Mary knew this promise well. All of God’s people did. It’s called the Davidic Covenant, and it was the foundation for their Messianic hopes. The Messiah would be the Son of David promised by God for 1,000 years.

The Psalms echo the hopes of God’s people in this covenant promise hundreds of years after David and before Mary. Psalm 132 says:

*For the sake of your servant David,
do not turn away the face of your anointed one.
¹¹The LORD swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
“One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my testimonies that I shall teach them,
their sons also forever
shall sit on your throne.” – Psalm 132:10-12*

And Psalm 89 praises God by saying:

*You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:*

*‘I will establish your offspring forever,
and build your throne for all generations.’” - vv. 3-4*

and then later –

*My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’
And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him. - vv. 24-28*

The language from 2 Samuel and from Psalm 89 speak of Messiah as being like a son to the LORD and the LORD being a Father to him. So, at this point in Gabriel’s message, Mary is likely just thinking that she is being promised that she will be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. This is stunning enough, to think that the hope Israel has had for 1,000 years would be fulfilled in her son.

Even though Mary is probably hearing this message so far as a fulfillment of Israel’s expectant hopes for a human Messiah, Gabriel’s words are already indicating much more: *“he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”* This was part of the Davidic covenant promise, and it should have prepared God’s people to expect a Messiah who was more than just a man, since he would reign over God’s kingdom forever. No mere human, no matter how good, can reign forever.

An Honest and Obvious Question, vv. 34-37

Mary’s response to Gabriel’s question is honest and obvious:

³⁴*And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

Now, Mary’s response to Gabriel is very similar to Zechariah’s response. Gabriel must’ve thought, “Why do these humans keep questioning the news I

bring them?” But while their responses are superficially similar, they reflect very different hearts: Zechariah was doubting God. Mary just didn’t understand how a virgin could conceive and give birth. The kind of miracle that Zechariah was promised, an older couple who had struggled with infertility being able to conceive and have a child, had been done before by God for his people. But no one had ever heard of a virgin conceiving and giving birth. Sometimes modern skeptics challenge the people of the Bible for being simple-minded and willing to believe in impossible things like a virgin giving birth. But the reactions of both Mary and Joseph make it clear that they knew it was impossible for a virgin to conceive and give birth.

While Gabriel rebuked Zechariah and cursed him with the inability to speak until after John was born, he patiently answered Mary's simple and honest question:

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.”

Gabriel's answer here is a clear rebuke to Muslim thinking, which rejects Jesus as the Son of God because they reject the blasphemous notion that God would have sexual relations with a human woman. Of course, such an idea *is* blasphemous! But that's not what Christians believe and not what the Bible teaches. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary as a miracle. His humanity came directly from her humanity, but He was also fully God.

This is when it begins to sink in for Mary that she will in fact be the mother of the Son of God, that she will carry divinity in her womb. Gabriel offers Mary the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth as proof that God would keep his word to her, too.

Why did Jesus need to be born of a virgin? Because He needed to be both God and man, the incarnation of God as a man, and He needed to be sinless from conception. If Jesus had an earthly father, He would have inherited his father’s sinful nature. He would only be an ordinary human child and not the

God-man. In Jesus' own person, even as a tiny zygote and embryo in the womb of His mother, God and man are reconciled in one person. He is, from the very beginning of His humanity, the one mediator between God and man, the only One who can lay a hand on us both and bring us together in Himself forever.

Sam Storms, a pastor in Oklahoma City, says, "*The principal reason for the virgin birth was so that the entry of God into human flesh might be by divine initiative. It is not by any human act or at any human initiative that salvation comes to us. It is divinely initiated. Man does nothing. Mary did nothing (other than to submit to what God would do). Joseph did nothing. God did it all.*"

A Humble and Obedient Response, v. 38

Mary's response to this clarification was humble and obedient, the only thing any believer should ever say to God:

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." – v. 38

Mary's life was made better but not easier by this impossible message. She wasn't dumb. She had to know how complicated and difficult this miracle was going to make her simple life, which seemed before to be so predictable. Contrary to our modern skeptics' simpleton stereotype, all ancient people knew that virgins don't conceive and give birth. When Joseph heard the news of Mary's pregnancy, he resolved to divorce her quietly. Scandal and gossip plagued Mary and Joseph and Jesus for the rest of their lives. And she couldn't possibly guess yet that she and Joseph and Baby Jesus would have to flee for their lives to Egypt and live in a foreign land for a time, nor that she would have to watch her divine Messiah-Son die a horrible death on a Roman cross while she wept inconsolably in agony and confusion.

Being chosen by God to be blessed by His grace makes our lives infinitely and eternally better, but it does not make them easier. People will often mock and ridicule and reject us for our faith in Jesus. Jesus promised us they would.

Living by Biblical principles and trying to be faithful to God often causes us to be out of step with the world and its ways. This time of year, I sometimes think we should refer to the church as "The Island of Misfit Toys" because following Jesus doesn't fit with our world.

Have You Been Surprised and Humbled by Christmas?

And just when we're feeling weighed down, this is when we once again need to have our hearts surprised and humbled by Christmas. God the Son, the King of Heaven, chose to step out of glory and enter into tiny, frail humanity for you and for me, to save us from sin and death and eternal destruction. He came because He loves us that much. He chose to come and save us, even though it would cost Him everything. This is more than a cute children's story; it's the real story of our salvation.

May we respond to the impossible good news of Christmas with humility, gratitude, joy, and a willingness to do whatever the Lord calls us to do as His children.