

The Advent of Jesus

The Confirmation of Angelic Prophecy

Luke 1:39-45

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The Confirmation of Angelic Prophecy¹

Scripture

Today is the *Fourth Sunday of Advent*. We are focusing our attention during this Advent Season on one of the Scripture Readings read during Advent. And so today's text is Luke 1:39-45.

Receiving confirmation for a significant event or activity is often important. When I was in the South African Air Force serving as an Air Traffic Controller, I used to tease the permanent force guys mercilessly. At a certain time each year they would receive news of promotions and new assignments. I would know which guys wanted to be assigned to different cities, and so weeks before the news came out about their new assignments I would go around and say, "I heard that you got the assignment you wanted."

"What!" was the excited reply, "how do you know that?"

"Oh! I have my sources," I would say.

Fortunately, on the day that the news came out most of the guys did get the assignments they had been hoping to get. And so most of the guys did not get too mad at me!

However, one year shortly after the assignments came out, the phone rang in the control tower. The major on duty answered the phone, and after a few words, hung up the phone and said to me, "Lieutenant Fritz, you're on your way to the sticks!"

Frankly, I did not know what "the sticks" was, and so I asked, "What do you mean?"

"You have been assigned to northern Namibia," he said.

I was shocked! *Northern Namibia? There's a war going on there. Surely not. Ha! I know. He is just teasing me and getting me back for all my teasing of the permanent force guys*, I thought.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"You can confirm it at the Commandant's Office," he said.

¹ The material for this sermon is from John MacArthur's book titled, *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 43-51.

“You need to go and see him now.”

I thought for sure that he was teasing me. So, knowing that the major could see me, I got on the bicycle and rode very nonchalantly to the Commandment’s Office. When I got to the office, however, the orderly on duty confirmed what the major had said to me: I was indeed being sent to northern Namibia.

The story of Jesus’ birth includes the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her of an extraordinary experience she is about to undergo: she is to conceive miraculously and give birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:26-35). Naturally, Mary is stunned by the news. But then Gabriel tells Mary that her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was well beyond her childbearing years, was already six months pregnant (1:36-38)!

It is at this point that our text for today begins. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth so that she can confirm the angel’s prophecy to her.

Let’s read Luke 1:39-45:

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, 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.” (Luke 1:39-45)

Introduction

Luke begins his Gospel with the story of two conception miracles, both involving women who at the time could not naturally have children.

Elizabeth was barren, probably in her sixties, and yet with

her elderly husband, Zacharias, she conceived and carried in her womb John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah.

Mary was a virgin girl of twelve or thirteen who became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and as a result would give birth to Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Even though there were differences in their ages and circumstances, both mothers were chosen by God to be human instruments in the two most unusual and significant births in the New Testament. The births marked the great peak in redemptive history, and the Holy Spirit providentially filled the two accounts with incredible, unmistakable similarities.

The two accounts in Luke 1 run as parallel accounts, with the same kind of narrative flow.

First, they both begin with an introduction of the child's parents, or parent.

Second, both mention specific obstacles to childbearing—Elizabeth's barrenness and Mary's virginity.

Third, the angel Gabriel made both announcements, each time to someone living in a small-town, out-of-the-way location. Elizabeth and Zacharias lived in the hill country south of Jerusalem; Mary lived in Nazareth, a small Galilean town north of Jerusalem.

Fourth, in both stories there was a fearful first reaction to Gabriel's words and a statement of reassurance from him.

Fifth, there was a description of the coming son and, in each case, an objection raised—by Zacharias, unbelief; by Mary, lack of understanding.

And last, before Gabriel's respective departures, he guaranteed his announcement would come to pass.

So Luke reported on two distinct incidents, separated by several months yet with the same basic elements, all leading to a wonderful convergence.

The separate encounters of Mary and Elizabeth with Gabriel, which neither woman knew the other had experienced, finally dovetailed shortly after Gabriel left Mary.

The special visit between Mary and Elizabeth poses some

obvious questions. What was the main purpose of such a meeting? Why did Mary go with such eagerness and haste to visit Elizabeth? What did it mean when the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb? And what was the prophecy that Elizabeth gave?

It's easy to deduce why Mary would have wanted to meet with Elizabeth as soon as possible. The news Mary had just heard from Gabriel was startling and mind-boggling. The angel understood how Mary was feeling and graciously gave her a sign that prompted her to embark quickly on the eighty-mile journey to Elizabeth's home: "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" (Luke 1:36-37).

Mary believed the angel, but his news was nevertheless beyond normal comprehension. First of all, angels didn't usually speak to mortals, and second, conception miracles just didn't routinely happen. Therefore, it's easy to understand that Mary would welcome anything that might bolster her faith—anything that might underscore the reality that such miracles do occur. After all, the conception that would take place within her body would be completely the result of God's miraculous intervention, without her even knowing when it happened.

Those unique circumstances lead inevitably to further questions, for Mary and for us. How could she withstand the emotional and spiritual strain that went with being the mother of God's Son? And because her pregnancy would not be physically noticeable for a period of time, how could Mary be certain right away that the angel's words had really come to pass?

Lesson

All of those factors compelled Mary to go without delay to visit Elizabeth—the one person who could verify for her that God was able to do a conception miracle. And so Mary went to Elizabeth to confirm the truth of Gabriel's words to her.

I. Mary Receives a Personal Confirmation

And the first aspect of this confirmation was that it came from Elizabeth, the only one who could provide such personal authentication.

When Mary first heard Elizabeth was pregnant (Luke 1:36), she realized an older woman such as her cousin could not be pregnant solely by human means. Mary also knew Elizabeth was far enough along (six months) so that her pregnancy would be clearly evident. Because she planned to leave her older relative after just three months' visit (1:56–57) and before Elizabeth gave birth, Mary wasted no time in making the trip. She embarked on the four-day journey within days of hearing Gabriel's announcement.

When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's home, she greeted Elizabeth according to the Near Eastern customs of that day. Such greetings were much more lengthy and involved than the simple "Hi, how are you?" that we are accustomed to using today. Exodus 18:7 contains a good illustration of the classic Near Eastern greeting: "Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent." As verses 8–9 of that chapter go on to describe, those ancient greetings were very special social occasions. The persons involved would embrace, physically display genuine affection for one another, and then engage in a lengthy dialogue about how life was going for each of them. It's safe to assume that's what occurred when Mary first met Elizabeth.

The two cousins definitely had much to talk about. Surely they each would have recounted their recent experiences with the angel Gabriel and marveled at how many similarities the two stories contained. Just listening to Elizabeth and realizing she was indeed pregnant provided a great personal confirmation to Mary. Since God fulfilled what he had promised to Elizabeth, he would also fulfill what he had promised to Mary.

For Mary, it only made sense to tell Elizabeth first about her

encounter with the angel a few days earlier. That way Mary's older relative could be a support for her when she told everybody else. Otherwise, if one so young had attempted on her own to share her good news with others, there would have been just a small likelihood that they would accept her amazing story. But Elizabeth was the one person who would have any rationale to accept Mary's testimony. And that's because Elizabeth was a living, personal confirmation that God was now doing conception miracles. What a tremendous initial confirmation that must have been for Mary!

II. Mary Witnesses a Physical Confirmation

During her visit with Elizabeth, Mary also witnessed an amazing physical phenomenon that further confirmed for her that God had placed his Son in her womb. Luke reported this remarkable incident as follows: **“And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb”** (1:41).

Such movement of a baby in its mother's womb is certainly not abnormal. In fact, it's probably one of the more enjoyable pleasures of childbearing to feel a baby moving before he or she is born. Almost every parent knows what it's like to place his or her hands on the mother's abdomen and feel the kicking and moving of the infant in the womb. Sensing the baby's movements is thrilling because that action indicates a new person is on the way.

But the movement of Elizabeth's baby was far more significant than that of a normal fetus in a mother's womb. That's because this fetus was a prophet, and not just any prophet, but, according to Scripture, the greatest prophet who ever lived—John the Baptist. His special leap was John's first proclamation, a silent prophecy in his earliest role as the forerunner announcing Christ's coming.

The unborn John was also fulfilling part of the angel's prophecy to his father, Zacharias: “. . . and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb” (1:15). But why would God cause such an unusual action? The supreme reason he

did so was to achieve something supernatural through John the Baptist while he was still a fetus. God in effect used the unborn John to make an unspoken but enthusiastic prophecy of support for the coming Messiah.

What God did through John was very unusual, but not without precedent. He also prophesied through the unborn Jacob and Esau the future conflict between Jews and Arabs (Genesis 25:21–23). When it suits his purposes, God can even use the activity inside a mother’s womb to preview his plans. We would expect such extraordinary occurrences leading up to the arrival of the Messiah, and John’s special prenatal leap was motivated by nothing less than Spirit-filled joy when he sensed the arrival of Mary, the mother of the forthcoming Savior.

The divinely inspired delight John displayed in approval of the birth of Jesus wonderfully foreshadowed his teaching later on as the forerunner of Christ. “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete” (John 3:29). If there was anything that characterized John the Baptist and his ministry, it was supreme joy. Ultimately, he was joyful because Christ the Bridegroom had arrived; but his joy originated at the prompting of the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother Elizabeth’s womb.

Would Gabriel’s news to Mary really come true? By this point in her visit to Elizabeth, an affirmative answer was coming into clearer focus. First, the testimony of the six-months’ pregnant Elizabeth gave Mary personal confirmation that conception miracles can happen.

Second, the joyful movement of Elizabeth’s son within her womb provided Mary physical confirmation that she would indeed bear the Savior, a fact that would bring joy to many besides John.

III. Mary Hears a Prophetic Confirmation

Next came a divine interpretation through the mouth of Eliz-

abeth of the significance of Mary's extraordinary situation.

During her visit with Elizabeth, Mary received a third confirmation that the angel's recent announcement was true. Luke, the historian and theologian, recorded Elizabeth's prophetic verification this way: **“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 1:41b–45).

Being filled with the Holy Spirit was often linked to speaking a message from God (2 Samuel 23:2; Luke 1:67; 2:25–28; 2 Peter 1:21). And when the Spirit filled Elizabeth prior to her crying out, it was simply an example of a familiar scriptural pattern and an indicator that she spoke divine revelation.

When Elizabeth literally shouted in such an unusual manner, she did so in enthusiasm over the incredible truth that Mary was going to bear the Christ. The older cousin also wanted, under the Spirit's direction, to emphasize dramatically the authority of that amazing news. Mary was undoubtedly moved with awe and encouragement as she heard this loud hymn of praise and blessing—one that pronounced blessing in almost every direction.

First, Elizabeth's message pronounced *blessing on Mary*: **“Blessed are you among women.”** This blessing is from a simple Hebrew construction that means, “You're the most blessed of all women.”

Elizabeth made such a sweeping statement because in ancient Jewish culture a woman's greatness was based on the greatness of the children she bore (Luke 11:27). Thus Elizabeth was telling Mary that she was most blessed because she was going to give birth to the greatest child ever, the Lord Jesus.

The opening words of Elizabeth's prophecy were actually quite humble because they acknowledged the superiority of her

younger relative's privilege. Even though just months earlier God had told Elizabeth and her husband, Zacharias, that her son would be great, she now knew he would not be as great as Mary's son. Elizabeth's son would be the forerunner of the Messiah, but Mary's son would actually be that long-promised Messiah. Therefore, Elizabeth was thrilled to concede that Mary was a greater beneficiary of God's goodness. As a righteous woman, Elizabeth was overjoyed to declare that Mary's calling and privilege was far greater than her own. It was one thing to bear a prophet but another thing altogether to bear the Lord.

Next, Elizabeth had great words of *blessing for the child*: **“Blessed is the fruit of your womb!”** This was a familiar Old Testament phrase that literally means, “Blessed is the child you will bear.” According to the unerring prompting of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knew Mary's son was going to be the most blessed child ever born. He would receive the full, unmixed, unmitigated blessing of heaven; he would be holy, harmless, undefiled, and perfectly sinless; he would receive all that the Father possesses, including a vast body of redeemed men and women to serve, praise, and glorify him forever. Without any doubt, Jesus deserved more praise and blessing than any child born before or since.

Third, Elizabeth's prophetic confirmation included a *blessing of herself*. In amazement, humility, and awe she wondered aloud how and why it was that the mother of her Lord would have visited her. **“The mother of my Lord”** was a great statement of prophetic confirmation that the child within Mary's womb was truly the Lord—he was already Elizabeth's Lord. **“Lord”** is an exalted title of divinity used twenty-five times in Luke 1–2 to refer to God, which further indicates that Elizabeth's statement can only mean that Mary's son was God.

Elizabeth closed her prophetic statement with a general beatitude that was a *blessing on all who believe*: **“And blessed is she [anyone] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord”** (Luke 1:45). Certainly Elizabeth initially directed this beatitude toward Mary, but its being in

the third person demonstrates that the Spirit widened it to include anyone who believes God's revelation. Isn't it true that if we believe God's Word and accept his fulfilled promises, we are blessed?

Conclusion

Mary is a wonderful example of how we should respond to God's message. He did not bless her just because she was privileged to bear the Messiah or because of her elite status in society or because she had a record of good deeds. Instead, God blessed Mary simply because she believed.

Mary is therefore a model of faith. She believed that the angel's divine message to her would be fulfilled. And she settled that faith in her heart and mind by pursuing a sure confirmation of the truth from Elizabeth.

After Mary received Elizabeth's threefold confirmation and all the encouragement that surely accompanied it, she must have rejoiced as she returned home three months later. She apparently did not need to stay for the birth of John the Baptist, and besides, it was time for her to get on with her life because by then she herself was three months' pregnant.

Mary's pattern is how we ought to live our lives. When God speaks to us through his Word, whether it's about the miracle of the Incarnation or any other truth, we must believe he will fulfill his promises. Then we must worship him and follow up with obedient service. That's the real issue as we consider Mary's visit to Elizabeth and all the other aspects of the story of our Lord's birth.

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develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
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in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the confirmation of angelic prophecy. Mary was given the most remarkable of all messages in all of history. Thank you for the way in which Luke records how Mary confirmed the angel Gabriel's words to her.

We now have your Word in our hands. You call us to believe and obey the good news of the Gospel. Help each one of us this Advent to believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners.

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.