

**The Birth of the Servant King**

Luke 1.26–38

***Sermon***

This the kind of story that keeps peo from becoming Xians. So many things peo find attractive about Xianity: ethic of love, pursuit of relig liberty for all, confidence & hope it inspires to suffering, defense of vulnerable (widow, fatherless, immigrant, poor). But many peo hit an insurmountable wall when confronted w a story like this, first bc of an angelic visitor (when does that ever happen?) & then bc of what that angelic visitor says (virgin conception?). Many thus conclude that in order to become a Xian, have to check brains at door/reason/science, take a leap into dark, & just “bel.” Why not rather just take things we like—justice, love, hope—and leave off pre-modern theo impossibilities.

Likely describes (at least in broad terms) many of you. Every Sun it is our great joy & delight to welcome neighbors & friends who are not Xians, would not call themselves Xians, have objs just like this. & esp so on a day like today/Xmas Sun/day many go to ch bc of trad/fam/special invitation. Glad you’re here. One of my greatest joys as pastor of this ch: your presence. Qs you raise, interaction we share sharpen me, make me a better pastor, perh ironically make me a better Xian.

So might come as a surprise to you that many of Xians in this room actually have same q you have: how can a child be conceived of a virgin? Long before days of IVF & even so not what’s in view here. Clearly something miraculous, not in contemp sense of “out of norm,” e.g., got Adele tix for MSG, a miracle! No, truly miraculous: something sci imposs, explainable only by divine intervention into normal laws of nature, w result that child *to be born called SofG* (35). More than that, not just you who aren’t Xians who ask this q & that you here who are bels ask this q, but Mary herself does (34)? Not just a modern/post-modern obj. As young as she was, Mary knew birds & bees. This just contemplation (carefully listen), interaction (humbly dialog), submission (ult yield) 1

doesn't happen. & yet here she is held up throughout this story & NT as a model of what true faith looks like. Yet she's asking the \$64K q: *how can this happen?* Which makes me conclude that perh our conception of faith isn't quite right. Tend to pit faith against reason, bel or think, study hard to get ans or take leap into dark. But in this psg that so incongruous to us, we find it's just as incongruous for main char, for Mary herself, the one whose example of faith we're supposed to follow. So before any of us think that faith means we have to check our brains at door, let's consider what Mary's faith looked like. & I do mean "any," whether you consider yourself Xian or not. Often bels miscontrue nature of faith. We all have something to learn.

Story begins w angel Gab (26). 2nd mention in this chap: 1st to priest Zech to prophesy birth of John the B. Here comes to Mary, presumably at home, greets her (28). Mary's response 2fold: *greatly troubled* (29), lit. "confused," ergo *wondered*. Whence **her confusion**? One level: nature of Gab's arrival. W Zech angel showed himself so spec that Zech fell on his face before him. So also other angelic visitors. Apparently not so here: clearly manifested himself as other-worldly, but not w full glory. But not just nature of his appearance. Nature of his greeting, i.e., what Gab said: *greetings* (standard 1st word upon seeing someone), *you who are highly favored*. Confusing for a variety of reasons: nowhere in Heb B do we hear someone addressed precisely this way (vb in Heb hardly ever used in passive). Must have been confusing that this unusual greeting was sent to someone living in Nazareth: out of the way, known for corruption, Nathaniel's q (*can any good thing?*). Didn't go to Judah/Jeru/Rome, but to Naz. & what's more, went to a woman (fem ptcp). Trad prayer: "G I thank you that I am not a Gentile, slave, or a woman." Prospects for a poor, young woman like Mary: marry young, have children, propagate husband's fam line, never travel more than a few miles from birthplace, die in obscurity. If anyone would be *highly favored*, you'd have thought it'd be a man with wealth in an influential city. Instead Gab went to a young, poor woman from nowheresville.

But pay careful attn: her confusion doesn't lead her to disbelief but to belief. In her confusion doesn't say, "I don't get any of this" & just walk away. No, she leaned into angel's word, pondered it, tried to und it. 1st lesson re faith: **lesson of contemplation**. Faith carefully listens to what G says. Doesn't check brain at door, presume "well, if it's a spir thing, it must be an irrational thing." No, presumes that if humans are rational beings, that reason must have come from a Supremely Rational One. Reason doesn't come from non-reason, consciousness from uncons, intelligence from emptiness. Faith presumes reason comes from One w supreme reason who can be understood. But if that One's reason is supreme, then must be greater than mine. Ergo there will be times that this Supreme One says things I don't understand, go beyond my ability to comprehend. Doesn't mean that G's irrational but that I'm limited.

Ill of going to Costco yesterday, looking at *Quest for Diamond Sword* (a book re Minecraft, a game I do not understand). One Amazon reviewer: got my 7yo son to read, but writing isn't very good. Dry & simple. "Mostly tho I was bothered by how events in book do not adhere to rules of MC, e.g., a zombie snatches a sword out of Steve's hands. I don't think that's poss in the game. Also chars find 40 diamonds in one place. Again, I'm no expert in the game, but that doesn't sound right. All sorts of exs like these, but admittedly, my son, who is arguably a MC expert, didn't mind the inconsistencies at all." Get all that? Presume MC a rational game. After all my girls are rational. But for me I und this just enough to decide against purchasing bk. Faith doesn't throw up its hands at 1st sign of confusion, like little girl at end of *Miracle on 34th St.* To be a bel not pretend we und everything or that we need und nothing. Faith assumes what G says will be beyond us, but that G who speaks is knowable. So we listen carefully. Contemplation.

Gab doesn't wait for her to ask about her confusion, launches right into his word of blessing for her (30–33). *Fear not:* not looking backwards, e.g., Zech scared out of his mind when he saw Gab. Apparently not so contemplation (carefully listen), interaction (humbly dialog), submission (ult yield) 3

for Mary. Instead looking forwards: “don’t let what I’m about to tell you terrify you.” Blessing: G about to fulfill his cov w David, promised K about to come, 1000 yr old prophesy about to be fulfilled. Gab’s words a loose paraphrase of his cov w David (2Sam 7), but also shades of prophecy we’ve been studying, Isa (esp 9.6–7). Huge promise: all Isr hoped for about to be fulfilled & only one to know it was a young, poor woman from Naz! & not only does she hear it & know it, but she’s to be means by which it comes about: *you will conceive, give birth to a son, name him J* (31). Which leads to **her question**, q we began w: *how will this be?* How can a child be conceived by a virgin? For Mary, not a q born of doubt. Earlier in chap when Gab appeared to Zech, he too replied w a q: *how can I be sure of this?* (18). Gab sees through Zech’s q to a heart of disbelief, says Z will be mute until baby born. But w Mary’s q, diff outcome. Instead of seeing through her q to a heart of disbelief, Gab sees through her q to a heart of humility: “I’m just a poor woman & a virgin at that. How can G show such favor to me?” & I know that’s what underlies her q bc of what she doesn’t ask about: doesn’t q the huge promise to be fulfilled. Almost as if she’s saying, “I know G can do that, but how could someone like me fit in?”

Which leads to 2nd lesson re faith: **lesson of interaction**. Faith humbly dialogs w what G says. Not a sin to ask G qs, in fact sometimes sinful not to ask qs bc we’re not really dealing seriously w G, just being lazy, not employing gifts of intellect he’s given. For those investigating Xianity, exploring what Scr teach, should encourage you in search. G not angry w you for exploring what he says, asking hard, honest qs about his word. Far better to interact w him over what he says than simply to throw up your hands in confusion & walk away from his word. G plenty big enough to handle your interaction. & for you who are Xians, shapes way we read B. Shouldn’t be a great divide bet reading B & prayer: two go hand in hand. Reading B spurs us to pray: “what does this mean? fulfill this for her.” & prayer (“what to do?”) leads us to B. Faith not passive. Spurs on active interaction.

Gab ans her q (35–37): she will conceive tho a virgin bc G will do miraculous for her. Terminology used here very carefully chosen: not that Sp would “father” child, certainly not that G would have sex w Mary. Nor a statement that sex inherently sinful bc J would be born apart from sexual interaction. Saying that for M to be *holy One*, to be *SofG*, Sp has to do something unusual, indeed miraculous, from very beg of his life on earth. Then employs relative Eliz as ill to stimulate faith: something miraculous for her too, will have a son tho had been barren. Implicitly recalls similar accts Mary would've known from Heb B: Sarah, Rachel, Hannah. Conc: *no word from G will ever fail* (37). “Only so much I can explain to you, your limitations are real, but it’s well w/in what you can und to see this truth: G’s word never fails. What he says not irrational, but supra-rational. You can trust him.” Ergo **her resignation**: *I am the L’s serv* (38). But don’t get wrong idea about “resignation”: not passive, que sera sera. Next thing Mary does? *got ready & hurried to Judea* to find Eliz (39–40): hadn’t heard barren Eliz was pregnant, wanted to see it for herself. See, resignation led to movement: not “if what G says is true, I’ll do nothing,” but “If what G says is true, I’ve got to see this.”

Brings us to 3rd: **lesson of submission**. Faith ult yields to what G says. At end of day confesses limitations of what I can know, acknowledges limitlessness to divine wis & knowledge, entrusts itself to his interp of universe instead of one’s own. & there’s the rub, to quote Shakespeare, genesis of this whole convo. Matter of ultimately yielding to G’s word that is so problematic, bc seems that at end of day we do have to check our reason at door, turn our brains off, & just bel. But that conc betrays our real prob: not a matter of belief vs. und, faith vs. reason, but a matter of what we will choose to bel. Ult we will not und everything so at end of day we’ll have to yield ourselves to some construct of reality that exceeds what we can test empirically, exp existentially, or und exhaustively. So at end of day not faith vs reason but what will be obj of our faith.

But not just a prob for you who don't bel. All here who are Xians would affirm truthfulness of what I've just said: yes, we should carefully listen to what G says, humbly dialog, ultimately yield. But every honest Xian would say we've failed that test pretty miserably. Today the 354th day of 2015. How many Xians could say they've contemplated G's word every day this yr? Not just read, went through devo reading, but actually thought deeply about it. & if you did, on how many of those days did you engage in dialog w G about what you exceeded your und? Ever acknowledge anything you didn't und? & if you did both of those all 354 days so far this yr, how about yielding to it? How do you score on that test? Every Xian here whose honest w themselves would have to say they've failed. & not just every Xian here, but main char in this txt too. Mary an example of faith, but herself not perfect. Magnificat: *my soul glorifies the L & my spirit rejoices in G my S* (46–7). She too needs a Sav. & that Sav would be Child she bore: J, whose very name means Y saves. Only One who would spend every day listening carefully to what G had to say: *sacr & offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened* (Ps 40.6). Only One who would enjoy perfect communion w G, who would never sin & thereby disturb communication: *here I am, I desire to do your will O G, your law is w/in my heart* (Ps 40.7–8). & only One who would yield fully to G, even when it meant he would die at hands of unjust men. & reason he would die precisely our failure to bel & obey as we ought. He died for sinners like us. Mary might be a good ex of faith, but only J the right obj of faith. & if you would entrust yourself to him, you'd find he's more than capable to carry you.

But such faith reqs humility, humility to acknowledge you need a Sav, every day. That thread of humility runs through psg, runs through heart of genuine belief. & perh more than anything that's what distinguishes saving faith. Last night after reading to Ashreyah: "if you stand up, I'll carry you to bed." What we think faith looks like, not so. Faith: "I can't stand up, but I und enough to know who you are. I can trust you. So please, carry me." If you come to J like that, he will carry you.