



## **Luke 1:26-38**

### **“The Manner Of His Coming” (3<sup>rd</sup> in a series on Luke’s Gospel)**

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Pastor Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
211 North Main St.  
Greenwood, SC 29646

Church Office: 864-229-7551  
Church Website: [www.msumc1.org](http://www.msumc1.org)  
Email: [PThrailkil@aol.com](mailto:PThrailkil@aol.com) (comments welcome!)

## **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 1:26-38 "THE MANNER OF HIS COMING"

Central Text For Mary, //Pre-public Career Of Ancient Hero

1) vv.26-27 INTRODUCTION: JOSEPH AND MARY, ANGEL SENT. //1:5-25, Suetonius Life Of Augustus

OT Theophany (Birth/Call Of Prophet) Pattern: Gen. 16, 17, Judg. 13:2-7

26 In THE SIXTH MONTH No Lineage, Woman// Man, God Again Initiates, 1:36, 6th Month For Elizabeth //Lk. 1:5-25
the ANGEL Gabriel was sent by GOD to a city (town) of Galilee named Nazareth, Village, 1. Setting, Angel Appears
27 to a virgin, 7 //s Is. 7:10-17, Early Teen, Gk. Parthenon, virginitas ante partum only
betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, Binding (Wife), Deut. 22:23-24, Lk. 1:32-32, 2:5
and the virgin's name was MARY (Miriam). Virgin (2x) Before Named, Moses' Sister, No Pedigree/Status, Between Stages

2) vv.28-37 THE ANNUNCIATION BY GABRIEL. Jesus' Conception Is Greater Than John Divine Revelation Through An Angel

a) vv.28-29 Call: "The Lord Is With You". The Lord Does Not Seek Her Father's/Husband's Permission! Alone, God's Abundant Grace (Charis)

28 And he came to her and said Greeting Emphasizes God's Gracious Choice For Her Mission
" Hail (Rejoice/chaire), O favored (charis) one, the Lord is with you! Reality! Zech. 3:14 (?), Ruth 2:4, Judg. 6:12
29 But she was greatly troubled (vexed) at this saying, Confusion At Greeting, Real Fear, 2. Immediate Reaction
and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. a. Emotional (troubled/fearful)
b. Intellectual (considered)

b) vv.30-31 Future Conception Announced By Gabriel To Mary: 4 Parts.

Initiative Remains With God, Named By Mother, Focus Is On The Child!

30 And the angel said to her Announced As If Already A Fact, Birth Affirms Humanity vs. Docetism
1) "Do not be afraid, Mary, 1:13, 3-4. Name Of Person/Reassurance
2) for you have found favor (charis) with God, 3x, God's Work Through Agents, //v.28b, Gen. 6:9(LXX)
3) And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, 5. Announcement Of Conception/Birth
4) and you shall call his name Jesus (i.e. God saves). v.31 = Mission 6. Name To Be Given By God
vv.30-32, 3x: God, Most High, Lord God

7 Statements

- 31 (1) son
(2) Jesus

c) vv.32-33 Gabriel's Canticle Proclaims Jesus' Future Messianic Destiny.

5 Future Verbs, Person: Who He Is, Work: Actions = Messianic Identity

32 (3) great a He will be great, Mic. 5:4, Acts 15:16, 7. Prediction Of Child's Destiny
(4) Son of Most High// a' and he will be called the Son of the Most High; Dt. 10:17, Heavily Political, Messianic Language
(5) Messiah b And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 1:17
33 (6) reign c and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever and ever; II Samuel 7:12-16, Ps. 2:7, Is. 9:6-7
(7) eternal c' and of his kingdom there will be no end." Now/Then, Creed, Acts 15:16, Is. 11:1-3, Ps. 89:26-36
Dan. 7:14. Jesus Is Ultimate Act Of God, Key To History As Ruler

b') v.34 Imminent Conception Questioned By Mary. 3 Assertions Of Virginity: vv.27a, b, 34

Mary Confirms Description With Her Testimony

34 And Mary said to the angel, No O.T. Precedent, Pragmatic Request, Dialogs With Angel!
"How shall this be, since I have no husband (lit. 'know not a man')?" Not if, 8. Objection: 3 Answers
Joseph Not Named, Not Miracle Of Healing But Creation

a') v.35 Mission: "The Holy Spirit Will... Overshadow You". Later Ministry Reveals Identity

Jesus' Conception Greater Than John's, Explains His Future

35 And the angel said to her, "God Is Not Father As Mary Is Mother" 9a. Sign 1: Religious Experience:
Miracle Of Divine Creativity, No Sex, Spirit Empowers/Protects
1) God's Part 1 "The Holy Spirit will come upon you"; 15, Gen. 1:2, Ex. 40:35, Ps. 33:6, Personal and Charismatic
2 and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; 9:24, //Pentecost, Is. 32:15//Acts 1:8, 3:14; 4:27, 30, 9:4
Divine Agency Not Narrated, Direct Creation// Adam 3:38
1' Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, Acts 3:14, 4:27-30; Uniquely Related To God As No Other
2' the Son of God." //v.32b, Mary Asked To Believe What Is Without Precedent, Son From Conception
How God Intervenes To Fix History = Through Willing Personal Agency, From Margin

1') vv.36-38 CONCLUSION: MARY'S CONSENT, ANGEL DEPARTS.

Invitation To Act, Find God At Work In Other Places!

36 And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son; 9b. Sign 2: Objective Confirmation:
and this is THE SIXTH MONTH with her who was called barren. Circumstances, Call To Faith!
37 For with GOD nothing will be impossible. (lit. "any word will not be impossible with God."), 18:27, Gen. 18:14
Jesus Is God's Act!
38 And MARY said, "How Can This Be?" Becomes "Let It Be!" Active/Passive Mary, 1:42 On Pregnancy
"Behold, I am the handmaid (servant/slave) of the Lord; Not Man's, Is. 49:3, 50:4, 10; 52:13 10. Response Of Assent
2) Mary's Part let it be to me according to your word." 1:45, 11:27-28, Model Disciple: Submission To God's Purposes, Hears And Obeys Word!
And the ANGEL departed from her. Status Games Upended! Now Begin The Consequences; Kingdom Planted

### A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:26-38

This is a loaded passage, not least because Catholics/Orthodox and Protestants part company over Mary. Protestants teach Mary was virginal at conception, not in birth, and not afterwards as she and Joseph conceived children, Catholics/Orthodox that her virginity was preserved during birth and afterwards in a celibate marriage with other children being Jesus' cousins (4<sup>th</sup> century). Fanciful church tradition (e.g. *Infancy Gospel of James*) and a rise in the estimation of virginity later in the church were imposed on a more straightforward reading of Scripture. Mary has a unique role because from her Jesus' human nature was formed in a true incarnation. But she was also a sinner in need of the salvation her Son came to offer, which climaxed in his cross, resurrection, ascension, session, and sending of the Spirit. Mary is honored as Jesus' mother and a model and pioneering follower. She was at the cross, received the Spirit, preached, and spoke in tongues (Acts 2;1-21)! Mary entered the fullness of her Son's person and work.

The surface structure is a seven part ring with a single center (1-2a-b-c-b'-a'-1'). Four terms in vv.26-27 (*the sixth month, angel, God, Mary*) are repeated in vv.36-38 as an inclusion marking the boundaries of the paragraph. The center is vv.32-33 with the focus in v.32c, "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David." The Son- uniquely related to the Father- is sent through Mary as Israel's rightful ruler and Messiah. The literary form is the same as John's annunciation with Jesus superior at every point. The Old Testament announcement of a surprise child is the paradigm. The point is continuity: God is doing afresh what God did earlier. A review of the content is in order.

In the introduction (vv.26-28) we hear of a second visitation of Gabriel six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy. We move from the Jerusalem temple to a village not even named in the Old Testament and from an old priest to a peasant girl who bears the name of Moses' sister. The move is from the center to the margin. Mary is sexually inexperienced and promised to Joseph in a marriage in which the betrothal is now legally in place with the payment of the bride price and signing the wedding contract. Mary is legally Joseph's wife, though it was up to a year before the wedding and the day bride and groom took up bed and board together. Her to-be is a Davidid; twice it is stated she is virginal. Good lineage, character, and unusual circumstances come together to greatly complicate Mary's life script; she's been drafted!

In scene two (vv.28-37) we have a candid dialog between Gabriel and Mary which emphasizes God's gracious choice, "Grace, O graced one, the Lord is with you." At such an intrusion of the invisible world Mary- as expected- is stirred with an emotional and intellectual response, "and she was greatly troubled... and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be." Religious experience engages the whole person: emotions, mind, and eventually the will (v.38). Round two has Gabriel calm Mary (v.30a), assure her of God's gracious intent (v.30b), announce the conception and birth of a son (v.31a), and give the name she will bestow (v.31b). Neither her father or fiancé gave permission for the event! Jesus' destiny is outlined in vv.32-33. Nothing higher could be prophesied than these verses of poetry.

Since Mary understands biology, her question, "How shall this be, since I -as yet- have no husband?" is rational. She assumes a natural conception as if to say, "But we are not yet intimate," to which Gabriel responds with a promised divine encounter through the non-sexual generative power of the Spirit. A Holy Spirit means a *holy child*, and the power of the Most High brings God the Son near. Here is an event without analogy, one-of-a-kind, and in that sense analogous to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. An empty womb is filled, an empty tomb evacuated. That God is fully able is clear from the sign of Elizabeth's conception. Mary's unforgettable assent follows. She willingly and in full faith says Yes. Gabriel then disappears. Thus the world is forever changed. God exercises a hidden, powerful influence.

<b>The Pre-Public Stories (Infancy Narratives) Of Matthew And Luke Compared</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Luke</b>
<b>Genealogy</b>	<b>1:1-17</b>	<b>3:23-38</b>
<b>Annunciation: Conception of John the Baptist</b>		1:5-25
<b>Annunciation: Conception of Jesus</b>		1:16-38
<b>Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth</b>		1:39-56
<b>Birth of Jesus</b>	<b>1:18-25</b>	<b>2:7</b>
<b>Annunciation to the Shepherds</b>		2:8-15
<b>Adoration of the Shepherd</b>		2:16-20
<b>Infant Jesus at the Temple</b>		2:21-38
<b>Star of Bethlehem</b>	2:1-2	
<b>Adoration of Magi</b>	2:3-12	
<b>Flight into Egypt</b>	2:13-15	
<b>Massacre of the Innocents</b>	2:16-18	

<b>Common Traditions In Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2 Point To An Historical Core</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Luke</b>
Jesus had two human parents: Mary and Joseph	1:18	1:27
Mary and Joseph were engaged -but not married- when Mary became pregnant.	1:18	1:27, 34
Joseph was a descendant of King David of Israel	1:16, 20	1:27, 32, 2:4
Mary conceived and became pregnant while she was still a virgin	1:18	1:27, 34
The Holy Spirit of God caused Mary's conception, not the intercourse of Joseph and Mary	1:18, 20, 23, 25	1:34-35
The news of Mary's pregnancy was initially unexpected and troublesome.	To Joseph	To Mary
Mary and Joseph remained together in spite of her premarital pregnancy, where marriage is not mentioned but surely implied.	1:24, 25	2
An angel visits Jesus' parents to announce the birth.	1:20-23	1:30-35
An angel gives the baby a name- Jesus.	1:21	2:11
Through angels Jesus is defined as <i>Savior</i> .	2:21	2:11
Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king of Judea.	2:1	1:5
Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.	2:1	2:4-6
Jesus will be king of the Jews. Jesus is Messiah	2:2, 4	1:32-33, 2:11
Jesus birth is understood in light of Jewish prophecies	Multiple	Multiple
Birth happens after Mary and Joseph have come to live together	1:24-25	2:5-6
Unexpected visitors are supernaturally summoned to visit Jesus.	Magi	Shepherds
Jesus, through born in Bethlehem, was raised in Nazareth.	2:23	2:39

Chart adapted from Mark D. Roberts, *The Birth of Jesus: Hype or History*, [www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusbirth/](http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusbirth/); Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 29.

## THE MANNER OF GOD'S COMING<sup>1</sup>

*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you...."*

The source of all new life is divine initiative leading to call and cooperation.

L U K E 1 : 3 5 b

**I**n the leader's final hours, he was almost completely alone. He faced death without the company of those who earlier swore allegiance. Most of his trusted friends deserted him. Some betrayed him. The world scorned him.

But not this disciple.

This disciple remained faithful to death, following his leader to the grave. His mind was fully committed, his will set on his leader's agenda, his heart thrilled by the intimacy of the relationship with his teacher. He was in awe of his king, humbled to be included in the inner circle. This disciple wrote of an early encounter with his leader: "Great joy. He greets me like an old friend. And looks after me. How I love him! Then he speaks. How small I am." The disciple later penned these words about his leader's teaching and influence:

"When he speaks, all resistance breaks down before the magical effect of his words. One can only be his friend or his enemy. He divides the hot from the cold. But lukewarmness he spits out of his mouth."

Before death he said of himself and his leader, "We shall go down in history as the greatest statesmen of all time, or the greatest criminals."

The disciple's name was Joseph Goebbels, and he was a disciple of his Fuhrer (his leader) Adolph Hitler. His *Heil Hitler* salute was- in effect- an act of worship. As others deserted, Goebbels spent his last days alongside Hitler in the bunker. When Hitler committed suicide, Goebbels and his wife followed close behind after killing their six children. Goebbels' prophecy was correct; they are among the greatest criminals in history. The atrocities they committed are disgusting, their plan to eliminate the Jews twisted and evil.

Joseph Goebbels was a true disciple of Hitler; he was- to use the terminology of the New Testament- a follower, a student, an apprentice, a believer, an understudy, a disciple.

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<sup>1</sup> This title is taken from Dr. Tom Oden's treatment of the early church's consensual teaching on the virginal conception in *The Word of Life*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), Chapter 5, 133-163.

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He emulated his leader and died a wicked man with a depraved heart. Such is the shaping power of one life upon another, and every life must have a center, some organizing principle.

The one in whose book I found this sobering story then added a summary evaluation; he wrote, “Not all discipleship is transformational.”<sup>2</sup> I add as a correction that all discipleship is transformational, just not in the same direction. Everyone is undergoing a shaping process determined by what’s around us and what’s in us, what we think life is about and who are our heroes. The question is not, Are we following? but Who? Not, Are we being transformed? but, In what direction? Not, Do I have a destiny? but, Which?

As a contrast, consider Miriam, peasant girl in Nazareth, either just past or just on the cusp of puberty<sup>3</sup> in a world where there was no developmental stage known as *adolescence*, just girls and women with the onset of fertility as the marker. Her life script was written by gender, her culture and Jewish faith: Joseph, marriage, children one after another- many of whom would not make it to age five, risking death every birth, life in Nazareth with occasional trips to Jerusalem for festivals if they could be afforded, wondering if their tribe’s God would fulfill his ancient promises, then death- likely before age thirty-five.<sup>4</sup> Mary had friends who died younger, and she knew where they were buried. Life was fragile.

But then, based on today’s story, Mary became a disciple, a follower in a physical manner, and her life script was rewritten by a divine hand. Consider the following: Mary accepted Jesus into her womb; we accept him into the center of the self we call *the heart*, thus conversion. He changed the shape of her life from within, just as he fills and shapes us all, thus growth in faith or sanctification. Everywhere she walked he went, just as we bear Christ to the world. She received a sign, and God has a way of sending us encouragements to keep us moving. Mary risked her life to give him birth, and many across the ages have risked their lives to make him known, thus witness and martyrdom. She was baptized in blood at his birth and we in the waters of baptism. She fed him at her breast; he feeds us at his table. She watched him die; he is there at our deaths to receive us. Mary, when you allow paradoxes, was the first disciple of her son, and from the moment she said, “Behold, I am the slave of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word,” Jesus was the shaping center of

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<sup>2</sup> The *Goebbels diaries*, as summarized in Eric Geiger, et. al., *Transformational Discipleship: how people really grow* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 5-6)

<sup>3</sup> For a review of first century Jewish understandings of virginity and puberty, see Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: history and legend* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 64-75. I do not buy his theory, but Vermes is a master of rabbinic parallels, many of them helpful.

<sup>4</sup> See “Family” at <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/family>.

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her life.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was at work within her for nine months, then beside her daily for thirty years before he entered the public work for which he was born, and it will be one of the delights of heaven to hear all the stories not included in the gospel biographies. And while Mary’s loyalty was tested, and while there were times after Jesus left home as a mature man of thirty that they did not follow him and could not understand he ways,<sup>6</sup> at the end we find Mary at the cross, at the tomb, among those receiving resurrection appearances, and in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost. Her life was reshaped around Jesus, and that is why she is justly the most famous woman who ever lived. It matters who you follow because there are only two destinies, and that is inside or outside the kingdom of God. It matters who you do business with because you give them influence. It matters what you become along the way, so follow the one she followed, the one who restores life. Let’s let mother Mary be our rabbi for a day. She’s in Luke’s Gospel, and it will make our Catholic friends happy for day!

Mary was not an atheist or a polytheist- both of which were living options in her world; she was a young Jewess who believed in the one God of her people Israel; she was not an agnostic who was uncertain whether or not God could be known; she was not a deist who could run her life quite well on a practical level without reference to God; Mary was a naive biblical theist to whom the first revelation of the Holy Trinity was about to be made. It was the historic faith of the Jews, rehearsed in Scripture and absorbed in the prayers of the Nazareth synagogue that prepared her for this new stage of divine revelation: an angel, an invitation, a prophecy, a question and answer. Then finally that for which Gabriel came, “Yes, Lord, I will take a risk with you. May it be so.” Long before the Beatles sang it, Mary wrote the lyrics, “Let it be. Let it be. Let it be. Let it be. There will be a Jesus. Let it be.” Mary was now involved with an involved God through a complex process of divine providence, angelic revelation, Holy Spirit creativity, and free assent.<sup>7</sup> She knew intuitively in her flesh more than all the theologians. Through Gabriel she heard the Father’s address, and- when enveloped by the Spirit- Jesus the Son was sent and conceived. She heard and was covered and then touched by the persons of the Triune God with physical effects. She became God’s living laboratory so that later the church honored her with the title *Theotokos*: the God-bearer.<sup>8</sup> Note that God did not ask either her father’s or her fiance’s permission to

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<sup>5</sup> Was this the moment of conception? The text does not say, but I think so!

<sup>6</sup> See Mark 3:21, 31; John 7:3 for stories the church would never have created.

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of Mary’s freedom as a personal agent in a patriarchal culture and what this means for women as full partners, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 247-258.

<sup>8</sup> On Mary across the life of the church, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale, 1996),

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speak with Mary. In a world where women were essentially property to be traded among men, God treats Mary as a full person in her own right! Reading this story to young women could be extremely dangerous; they might all become prophets. Reading it in circles of Muslim young women could be especially disruptive! A martyred saint from the fourth century, Theodotus of Ancyra, found great significance in Mary. Here is his meditation:

“The hunter has no wish to startle his prey. Choosing for his birthplace an unknown village in a remote province, he is born of a poor maiden and accepts all that poverty implies, for he hopes by stealth to ensnare and save us.

If he had been born to high rank and amidst luxury, unbelievers would have said the world had been transformed by wealth. If he had chosen as his birthplace the great city of Rome, they would have thought the transformation had been brought about by civil power. Suppose he had been the son of an emperor. They would have said: ‘How useful it is to be powerful! Imagine him the son of a senator. It would have been: ‘Look what can be accomplished by legislation!’

But in fact, what did he do? He chose surroundings that were poor and simple, so ordinary as to be almost unnoticed, so that people would know it was the Godhead alone that had changed the world. This was his reason for choosing his mother from among the poor of a very poor country, and for becoming poor himself.”<sup>9</sup>

### **TURNING TO THE TEXT**

#### **1) vv.26-27 Introducing The Characters.**

Luke does not argue for but presumes the existence of a parallel world, not far away, just invisible until revealed.<sup>10</sup> From that transcendent world a messenger is sent at a *precise* time- the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, to a *particular* young woman- Mary, in a *specific* Galilean village- Nazareth, who was at an *identified stage* of ancient Jewish marriage-betrothal. The contract was signed, but they had not yet assumed bed and board together because it was sometimes up to a year between the two events. Something big is up.

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and on the title *Theotokos* Chapter 4, “The Theotokos: The Mother of God,” 55-65.

<sup>9</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

<sup>10</sup> N.T. Wright has written, “The ‘closed continuum’ of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not intervene from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been active on this occasion” (*The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* [San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1998], 73.)

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God does not waste the substance of divine revelation. Nothing special about Mary’s life to this point- just one of the Nazareth girls about to marry. But there are times when the other world makes itself known, when God reveals to release new energies and give history a mid-course correction. We are free within limits, but how the limits expand and contract up to God.<sup>11</sup> Six months earlier Gabriel had appeared to the old priest Zechariah inside the Jerusalem temple as he burned incense just outside the Holy of Holies.<sup>12</sup> But the subsequent appearance to Mary is not at the center of national life but near the edge in backwoods Galilee and nowhere Nazareth, not to a man with status but to a girl with nearly none. We are now ready to appreciate verses 26 and 27: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Nazareth named Galilee, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.”

**2a,b,c) vv.28-33 The Angel And The Invitation.**

There are in the Old Testament any number of precedents for such angelic appearances concerning children who will be used of God, so many in fact that a standard ten part pattern of telling was developed. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Hannah and her husband. It is into this mold that the story is poured. Any Jew would immediately recognize what was occurring.<sup>13</sup> God is about to shape the future through the gift of a child who has a divine call and destiny. The events surrounding the conception and birth are forecasts and previews of what is ahead. I like what Glenn Owens says about where initiative lies:

“God must reserve for Himself the right of the initiative, the right to break into my life without question or explanation. That shattering phone call, that disturbing letter ... may indeed be the first stage of God's interruption in my life.... Since God does the initiating, He must be responsible for the consequences.”<sup>14</sup>

And, as someone else once said, “The call of God will not take you where the grace of God cannot keep you.” Mary must say *Yes*, but after that God bears the main responsibility, and looking back from the far side of resurrection we can say that whatever the interim events,

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<sup>11</sup> “The laws of nature are not chains which the Divine Legislator has laid upon Himself; they are threads which He holds in his hand, and which He shortens or lengthens at will” (J. Oosterzee, quoted in D. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 126.

<sup>12</sup> 1:5-25.

<sup>13</sup> See Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 18-21.

<sup>14</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

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however hard and brutal- including the cross, that God was indeed faithful, both to Jesus and to his mother in whose names the most magnificent pieces of architecture have been built. She did not seek fame or to become the most revered woman in all history, but that is what happened because of what God did with her consent. The art about this woman and her son are pervasive and priceless. Beneath the secular veneer of post-Christian Europe lie buried treasures of faith and the prayers of generations that will not go unanswered.<sup>15</sup>

Now to *be sent* an angel does not have to travel, only be disclosed and revealed from that realm to this one. And if God opened our eyes today, they would be all around us. And if they were to be seen by more than one person, this church would immediately become a place of pilgrimage with TV crews everywhere. God has no trouble getting the world's attention when desired. All that has to be done is draw back the veil. For Mary it was an audience of one in a daytime visit; God came through a mediator to gain her attention.

There is a play on words in verse 28 that is missed in English. The greeting *Rejoice* and the address *O favored one* have the same root in Greek which has to do with both grace and joy. A paraphrase might be *Grace to you, O gifted lady*, then the reason, "The Lord is with you." Grace is not a thing apart from God but God's gracious presence, here mediated through Gabriel. God choice is one that draws Mary deep into the divine purpose.

To have a being such as Gabriel appear before you without warning is startling, and there is no way to avoid the fear and questions it raises. The other world has opened itself to Mary, and such experiences- I am told by those who have had them, are profoundly disorienting. All your circuits are lit up as you stand trembling at the edge of holy mystery, verse 29: "But she was *greatly troubled* at this saying (an emotional response), and considered *in her mind* what sort of greeting this might be (an intellectual response). God engages the whole of who we are and arouses every faculty to attention.<sup>16</sup> You should not be surprised in worship if God stirs feelings, enflames your brain and calls for action.

Mary is then calmed and the *grace* word repeated yet a third time, "for you have found *favor* with God." All Mary has to commend herself is vulnerability and innocence. It is then, when fears are calmed and grace assured, that she is notified of a possible future stated as if it were already an accomplished fact, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name *Jesus* (God saves)." Frederick Buechner's little book of character sketches has this to say about Gabriel as he encounters Mary:

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<sup>15</sup> For a hopeful picture, see Phillip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to Christian mysticism, see John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2005).

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"She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."<sup>17</sup>

Some have said that the words of verses 32 and 33 were spoken. Because there are so many poetic pieces scattered through Luke chapters 1 and 2, I believe they are songs preserved in the early church. Picture it. The highest angel of heaven, Gabriel, sings a prophetic song of Jesus' destiny to his mother. All the verbs are in the future tense, and the song has five lines. The first two are in parallel and give us Jesus' identity, "He will be great/ and he will be called the Son of the Most High." The last two are in parallel and give his function, "and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever and ever/ and of his kingdom there will be no end." At the center in line three is the punch line; it tells who Jesus' backer is, "And *the Lord God* will give to him the throne of his father David." This is the Messiah, the climax of all Jewish hopes, the one sent by God, but not as anyone expected.

There was only one other person for whom such exalted titles were used; he did not live nearby, and he was not a Jew. He lived across the Mediterranean in Rome with his twenty eight legions extended to the borders of the Empire. It was Octavian who had earlier won the civil wars and brought peace through the strength of military violence. He was the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar who after death had been declared a god. So Octavian, now bearing the title *Augustus Caesar*, was not only *son of God* but also himself worshiped as divine.<sup>18</sup> The titles the New Testament gives to Jesus, titles like *Lord*, *Son of God*, *Bringer of Peace*, and *Savior of the World* were overtly political and first applied to Roman Emperors. Where we hear religious meaning, they heard definite political and perhaps even treasonous echoes. And when we learn that Augustus was himself claimed to be the result of a union between his mother and Apollo in the form of a snake, the comparisons grow even more intriguing.<sup>19</sup> Who is this world's rightful ruler?

What we have before us is an angel, Gabriel, speaking in the future tense about a child

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<sup>17</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

<sup>18</sup> See Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007), Chapter 3, "The Context of the Christmas Stories," 56-78 for this comparative material on titles.

<sup>19</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Nativity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), 48.

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who will rule the Jews and establish a different sort of Empire than the one currently in operation. It is not the rule of Caesar that will be eternal and everlasting, rather the kingdom Jesus brings. There is no doubt whose side God is on in this contest. The law of the jungle is peace through violence and military superiority; but another kingdom is already making its way in the world, and it is a kingdom made powerful by other weapons: by justice, by love, by truth and by the willingness to suffer violence rather than inflict it, and it is more powerful than the ultimate weapon of its opponent: the threat of death. And in the most visible clash between the two powers one fine Friday morning Jesus appears to lose, and lose decisively to Roman power. As the Creed says, he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” In other words, *Jesus is a big loser*. Crosses are reserved for the two criminals at his sides and for political pretenders such as this *King of the Jews*. Peace through dominance and violence is the only path to order. Or is it?

Then something happens, something as much of God as the virginal conception. God bodily raised Jesus and presents him again to his followers in a new and indestructible life. The life of Jesus is bounded fore and aft by the actions of God, virginal conception and empty tomb, the first marked *No Entry*, the second marked *No Exit*. Both are his unique credentials, and they mark out all that went on between them as the personal action of God in our midst. So the question is and remains: Which kingdom are you siding with? Who gets your vote, your loyalty and your life? Who is the rightful ruler of this world? The latest Emperor and his Empire or King Jesus? And that decision effects everything, from how you spend your time and money to the politics and foreign policy of whatever nation you happen to live in. What kind of world does God wish, and what are we doing to alert people to the change of governments that is already underway?

When the early Christians told and retold Luke’s story, it was not a choice between religion and politics but an in-depth engagement with both at the same time. Augustus and his propaganda machine had one ideology- peace through conquest and control; the church had a different, and ultimately subversive idea: peace through Jesus, crucified and risen. One reason the church has been able to survive in so many persecuted places is precisely because of the conviction that all other kingdoms are already under judgment and passing away.

Heaven is above and it is now; it is the realm of light from which Gabriel appeared, but the kingdom of God that has no end is still out ahead of us, though it is heading our way at the speed of grace and making its presence felt through anticipation and hope. Glimmers of its rising can already be seen for those with eyes to see. This world is headed towards a radical transformation, as radical and wonderful as what happened to the broken, bruised, dead body of Jesus which was first formed in Mary’s virginal womb. Jesus was born out of the darkness of a borrowed womb, and reborn out of the darkness of a borrowed tomb!

**2b’a’) vv.34-35 Practical Objection And Theological Answer.**

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Jeremy Basset tells of his 5-year-old niece Olivia and a friend Claire who were in a school play. Claire was playing Mary and Olivia an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, "I'm a sheep, what are you?"

"I'm Mary."

Face to face with a lead character, he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part, "It's hard being a sheep, you know."

Claire's replied, "Yes," she said, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know."<sup>20</sup>

Mary was innocent, not naive. She knew where babies came from; in village homes there is no such thing as modern privacy. That she converses with the highest of heaven's messengers about such intimate matters is a brassy thing for young woman, "How shall this be, since I know not a man?" She assumed the conception would be marital.

It was then that Gabriel answered her question- but only partly. It was to be a new thing. In the Greek legends great heroes and heroines are taken to be the offspring of a mortal and one of the gods or goddesses from whose union a remarkable child is born. This is much greater. In the Jewish stories it is typically the old or barren who are restored to be able to conceive. This is much greater. Here the God who has no body and thus beyond gender is, by an act of direct creation- as in the story of Adam- creating a new human being. Jesus is not the male child of a masculine deity. Jesus is a male created by the God who as the *heavenly* Father is beyond gender since God has no body but is an invisible Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

That God is Father is not a statement about God's gender but about God's transcendence. God is above; God is holy; God is other. With female deities the world is their offspring, the extension of their own bodies birthed from the womb, but to say that God is Father is to assert the creation theology that the world is related to but not to be equated with God in quite the same way. God and creation are not confused, not merged or bonded but distinct. God does not create through union with a complementary sexual other as with a Greek god and his girlfriend but by the divine word made effective by the Holy Spirit. God speaks; the Spirit enacts; Mary hears and says Yes; the Son obeys, and the result is a seed of

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<sup>20</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

<sup>21</sup> Our *Articles of Religion* clarify this belief, "Article I: Of Faith in the Holy Trinity: There is but one living and true God, everlasting, *without body or parts*, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (*BOD 2008*, 59).

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new life in a dying world. The virginal conception of Jesus is not like the Greek myths; it is not the sexual union of a human mother and a male deity. The child that results from this divine action is, with Mary's enabling consent, uniquely related to God, thus a holy Son. And how is this to occur? By the creativity of the Holy Spirit who will cover and enfold Mary in the divine presence, verse 35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." She is empowered and protected. What happens to Mary happens to the church three years later on the Day of Pentecost when the same Spirit came to form the life of Jesus in the hearts of the hundred and twenty who waited in prayer. The same thing happens here every Sunday as the Word of God is read and preached. New things are conceived as the Holy Spirit takes the Word of God from the ear to the heart.

Jesus did not earn deity by stellar behavior; he was not promoted like Augustus for great and mighty deeds.<sup>22</sup> He did not become what he was not. He displayed what he always was, which is why all schemes that portray Jesus as a good Jewish boy who did well and was rewarded with resurrection get it wrong. He was never anything other than uniquely God the Son taking on flesh in the womb of his virgin mother Mary. The mature thinking of the church is found in the Nicene Creed: "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man."

In this divine action both sexes are honored. All men by Jesus' male gender; all women by the fact that if there was to be a real incarnation, only a woman could be the vehicle where such a life could be knit together from conception to birth. Jesus did not arrive fully grown; he came out of the body of his mother like any newborn. Blood and sweat, pain and tears. The profound complementarity of the good creation is upheld in the work of redemption. All that is excluded is the typically male pride which always wants to claim the credit. C.S. Lewis said it best, "Jesus was conceived when God took off the glove of nature and touched Mary with his naked finger. Thus, Jesus did not evolve up and out of history."<sup>23</sup>

To explain this life of Jesus and the immense benefits it brings you have to attribute it to the action of God. Human merit is from the start excluded. So it is for us. It is God's election that is the basis of our salvation and not our strivings. But once we are restored as God's children- once we are reborn from above, we are to display our new identity and family likeness which means a life of love and good deeds as led by the same Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The ancient error of Adoptionism.

<sup>23</sup> Idem.

<sup>24</sup> That justification by grace through faith (Protestant emphasis) leading to an unfolding life of good works (Roman Catholic emphasis) were both taught by the fathers is made clear in Dr. Thomas Oden's, *The Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI:

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Jesus lived out who he was, and we are to do the same. What he was by nature, the unique Son of the Father, we are to be by grace- the adopted sons and daughters of God, showing the world in our doctrine and in our lives the outline of the new world that is coming. Who we are is the basis of anything we may do. It cannot be earned, only expressed, and the temptation is always to do more or other than God leads, both of which are dead ends. God is not impressed by our ideas or zeal; what God wants is humble cooperation and a willingness to follow, which is precisely what Mary offered. She is the model for receiving and expressing the life of Christ within her; she is her Son's first disciple. Welcoming him changed her life and the world. Mary did not have a program for self-esteem or a grand plan for global political progress. What she had was a faith-filled relationship with the living God, and that is worth more than all the world's fix-it schemes.

**1') vv.36-38 Outward Sign And Inward Assent.**

A sign is now given Mary for her encouragement and action. She will have to take up a pilgrimage to the hill country to confirm Gabriel's word concerning her much older cousin. Mary will learn that she is not alone in dealing with God and the heavenly messenger. Others have entered this realm before ever she was contacted. She is not alone in this secret work for God. Elizabeth and Zechariah go before her and Joseph, just as John will later go before Jesus. Hearing what God is doing in the lives of others, what we call *testimonies*, is a powerful encouragement to believe God ourselves. Faith is deeply personal, but never merely individual or private. In faith we warm our hands and hearts at one another's fires.

What did God want from Mary? The same two things God wants from us: *I am yours* (surrender) and *let it be* (service). Her's was to express the faith that came to her by God's favor. God spoke; she received and conceived. God sought her consent; she gladly gave it.<sup>25</sup> And it is interesting that her reply opens with the same word of attention Gabriel earlier used to address her, "*And behold,*" he said, "you shall bear a son...." "*Behold,*" said Mary in echo to Gabriel, "I am the Lord's slave; your word is enough. Whatever else happens is up to you." And though we are not told, this was likely the moment of conception.<sup>26</sup> Gabriel then vanished back behind the veil. Mary packs her bags and heads to Elizabeth.

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Eerdmans, 2002), *The Good Works Reader* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> My favorite quote on this transaction is Cabasilas, "It was only after having instructed her and persuaded her that God took her for his Mother and borrowed from her the flesh hat She so greatly wished to lend him" (Oden, *Word of Life*, 150).

<sup>26</sup> In the next scene, 1:39-56, the pre-born John responds to Jesus' presence.

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**CONCLUSION**

You can become a Christian by believing only a little. That Jesus is God the Son who died for sin and rose to give new life. I confess my sin and say Yes to him in my heart and with my lips. But once across the threshold and inside the household of God there is much more to learn and believe. A whole new world of sights opens up: the Holy Trinity of which Mary was the first to receive a revelation; the virginal conception as the chosen means of God's coming; that the church and its sacraments are part of the Spirit's continuing work in the world; that the Scriptures are the standard of faith and practice; that the Spirit gives gifts and issues calls; that confession and forgiveness in community are ongoing concerns; that evil is personal and sin pervasive, and on and on and on. The church is a treasure chest.

The goal is not to believe as little as you can but as much as you dare and to experience more and more of what God offers. And in the work of making a good beginning and then being draw deeply into partnership with God, there is no better teacher than mother Mary who blazed a trail for all who would welcome her Son, and in this sense she is the mother of all who believe.<sup>27</sup> She is a picture of the church. It really matter who you follow. Only follow someone if the they are following the Lord, with his mother first in line!

Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
December 16, 2102

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<sup>27</sup> For a sermonic treatment of the texts on Mary and Jesus' family, see Phil Thrailkill, *Mary* (Anderson, Indiana: Bristol House, 2007).

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