

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Luke 1:26-38** **“God Takes A Dive”**

December 14, 2014  
(3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent)

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

LUKE 1:26-38 "GOD TAKES A DIVE"

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, Customs Binding (Wife), Deut. 22:23-24, Lk. 1:32-32, 2:5
and the virgin's name was MARY (Miriam). Virgin (2x), 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". Lord Not Seek Her Father's/Husband's Permission!

28 And he came to her and said Alone, God's Abundant Grace (Charis) ->Call/Mission
" Hail (Rejoice/chaire), O favored (charis) one, the Lord is with you!" Greeting Emphasizes God's Gracious Choice For Her Mission
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.

30 And the angel said to her Initiative Remains With God, Named By Mother, Focus Is On The Child!
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
(2) Jesus 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.

32 (3) great a He will be great, 5 Future Verbs, Person: Who He Is, Work: Actions = Messianic Identity
(4) Son of Most High// a' and he will be called the Son of the Most High; Mic. 5:4, Acts 15:16, 7. Prediction Of Child's Destiny
(5) Messiah b And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, Dt. 10:17, Roman Imperial Terms
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

34 And Mary said to the angel, No O.T. Precedent//Barren Women, 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, 1:15, Gen. 1:2, Ex. 40:35, Ps. 33:6, Personal & 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.

36 And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son; Invitation To Act, Find God At Work In Other Places!
and this is THE SIXTH MONTH with her who was called barren. 9b. Sign 2: Objective Confirmation:
37 For with GOD nothing will be impossible. 1:49, (lit. "any word will not be impossible with God."), 18:27, Gen. 18:14
God's Power Is Present, Requires Cooperation, 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: Consent To God's Purposes, Hears And Obeys Word!
And the ANGEL departed from her. It Ended, 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 the Catholics/Orthodox and Protestants part company over Mary. Protestants teach Mary was virginal in conception, not in birth, and not afterwards as she and Joseph conceived children. Catholics and Orthodox teach 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 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 as a model, 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 structure of the unit 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*) repeat in vv.36-38. The center is vv.32-33 with a 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. The literary form is the same as John's annunciation (1:5-25) with Jesus superior at every point. The Old Testament announcement of a surprise child is the model. The point is continuity: God is doing afresh what God did earlier, only more so!

In the introduction (vv.26-27) 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 where the betrothal is now legally in place with the payment of the bride price and signing of 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.28-35) 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 intent (v.30b), announce the unique conception and birth of a son (v.31a), and give the name she will bestow (v.31b). Neither her father or husband 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, to which Gabriel responds with a promised divine encounter through the non-sexual generative power of the Spirit. The 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 (v.36-37). Mary's unforgettable assent follows; she willingly and in full faith says Yes (v.38a). Gabriel then disappears (v.38b). Here he world changes forever, but there is also a waiting period of thirty years.

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## GOD TAKES A DIVE

*“Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”*

A human life uniquely related to God’s initiative, a true incarnation.

LUKE 1 : 3 5 c

**I**n September of 1940, Witold Pilecki, a Polish army captain, did the unthinkable: He snuck into Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi concentration camp. He knew something was wrong and as a committed Catholic and Polish patriot couldn't sit idly by. He wanted information that could only come from inside another world.

His superiors approved the plan and provided a false i.d. card with a Jewish name. Pilecki then allowed the Germans to arrest him during a routine Warsaw roundup. He was sent to Auschwitz as inmate No. 4859. A husband and father of two, he later said, "I bade farewell to everything I had known on this earth." He became just another prisoner: despised, beaten, threatened with death. From inside he wrote, "I had gone far beyond what people in the real world consider dangerous."

Beginning in 1941, No. 4859 started his work. He organized inmates into resistance units, boosting morale and documenting crimes. Couriers smuggled out reports. By 1942, he'd organized a secret radio station using scrap parts. In the spring of '43, Pilecki joined the camp bakery where he overpowered a guard and escaped. Once free, he finished his report, estimating around 2 million souls already killed. In London, officials thought he was exaggerating; today we know differently.

Here's how a Jewish journalist summarized Pilecki's life: "Once he set his mind to the good, he never wavered. He crossed the great human divide that separates knowing the right thing from doing the right thing." Of himself he said, "There's always a difference between saying you will do something and actually doing it. Many years before, I had worked on myself to be able to fuse the two." The Polish Ambassador to the U.S. described Pilecki as a "diamond among Poland's heroes."<sup>1</sup>

Pilecki’s mission past the gates of horror and into hell on earth offers an

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Eshman, "The man who snuck into Auschwitz," JewishJournal.com (Dec. 5, 2012); Captain Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer* (Aquila Polonica, 2012).

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analogy for the person and work of God’s Son, who as the man Jesus dropped behind enemy lines into a world ruled by a usurping tyrant with death camps everywhere. Pilecki escaped, but not Jesus. He identified fully with the entire range of human life, from conception through the ages and stages to an ugly adult death and the cold silence of a borrowed grave. Jesus knows what it’s like to suffer. Tim Keller wrote:

“There is no way to have a real relationship without becoming vulnerable to hurt. Christmas tells us God became breakable and fragile, someone we could hurt. Why? To get us back. No other religion- whether secularism, Greco-Roman paganism, Eastern religion, Judaism, or Islam- believes God became breakable or suffered or had a body.”<sup>2</sup>

The church has a special word for this event which lays the foundation of all Jesus was and did, and- interestingly enough- the word is not found in the Bible. The idea is there, but not the later technical Latin term *incarnatio*- *incarnation* in English,<sup>3</sup> which indicates the event of God moving into the human neighborhood by *taking on flesh*. The man Jesus is the result of God the eternal Son taking on the meat of muscle and the structure of bones and the elimination system of kidneys and innards, the cooling system of sweat glands, the unfolding processes of human development and the gender shaping powers of testosterone, the particularities of hair and eye color and teeth and a human brain and all that belongs to an embodied life.

What this means is that *the everywhere God* has gone local and *the all-powerful God* is self-limited for the sake of the mission. The privileges of deity are laid aside for the long journey of learning and being dependent on the Holy Spirit for insight and power. God the Son as a zygote, an embryo, a foetus, a cone-headed newborn baby boy, all cheezy and bloody, yet knowing his mother’s heartbeat and voice in a strange new world. John says that in him *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*.<sup>4</sup> In Colossians Pauls says the same thing in other words, “For in him the whole fullness of deity *dwells bodily*.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Guthrie, editor, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* (Wheaton: ILL: Crossway Books, 2008), 38- 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Incarnation,” [www.newadvent.org/cathen/07706b](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07706b).

<sup>4</sup> 1:14.

<sup>5</sup> 2:9

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God has come this near for a purpose, and that is to show himself at ground level to win our trust and show the lengths he would go to win us back. What more can God do than to put the divine life on such close and intense inspection as a cure for our ignorance and treason and what we have become because of the Evil One with whom we have too often cooperated. It's a big rescue mission. One brave Pole sneaking into Auschwitz is an analogy; God the Son coming incognito into prison camp earth is the reality to which the image points. We have been visited.

Without ceasing to be who he was, God the Son assumed a full human nature with all its limits but without a hint of rebellion, thus no sin. *Like us* so he can reach us, *unlike us* so he can heal us. Jesus is a limited but morally perfect human being. Two natures, divine and human, joined in one person forever. To do business with Jesus, as people did when he was among us, was to do business with full deity become touchable and local with a hick accent. Jesus is God's human face, and now that face and flesh are glorified in a transformed resurrection body. It is because of what people experienced in his presence, because of what he did and said about himself, and because of what was done to him on the third day after death that his earliest friends were forced to modify their strict Jewish theology and apply *God language* to him because nothing else was adequate. And if God emptied a full tomb on Easter, the perhaps the same God filled an empty, virginal womb so that no earthly father could take credit for the life that followed.<sup>6</sup> I believe in the virginal conception and the incarnate life because I am a faulty follower of a risen Jesus who came among us through a door marked *no entry* and left through a door marked *no exit*. Jesus did not emerge out of the soup of human evolution as a religious genius; he is God's one-time gift, an insertion into an open system which remains user-friendly to its Creator.

It is because God is first a Triune communion that the enfleshment of the Son makes sense within the larger framework of revelation. The Father who sent the Son as his authorized agent at ground level did not take on flesh and neither did the Holy Spirit who enabled and accompanied the Son across his life; it was God the Son who assumed flesh as a full human person, as the mature thinking of the church makes clear in the Nicene Creed where it is announced:

“For us and for our salvation (because we needed it!), he came down from heaven, *was incarnate* (there's the fancy word!) of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>6</sup> See N.T. Wright, “Why are the virgin birth, empty tomb and resurrection controversial?” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2xCP5odvNQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2xCP5odvNQ).

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and the Virgin Mary (a joint operation) and became truly human.”<sup>7</sup>

Classic Christian belief, which is preserved in our United Methodist doctrinal standards, makes a radical claim to all the world, and here it is in all its offense:

“This Jesus thing is not our fault, though preserving the stories and their meaning is our responsibility. We didn’t make it up. It happened in front of Jesus’ friends in the public squares of his homeland. It’s grounded in something God did without much warning and no permission except that given by Mary, so examine the evidence, because if it’s truer than true, it makes all the difference. We are a visited people. Hang out with us, ask all the questions you will and watch what happens, because if you seek him he will find you! Jesus wants you to trust him because you know him as reflected through his ancient and modern followers. It’s not a leap in the dark but a leap into his light. Faith is not blind; it’s trust based on evidence. Call us arrogant, call us deluded, call us narrow, but please examine the evidence. Read his biographies and ask, Why did people write this stuff? Why has it changed so many? What if his first followers were telling the truth?”

Whatever you think of his followers and our failures since it all started, classic Christians have a conviction we celebrate yearly at Christmas and which has infected nearly the whole world with its afterglow and wealth of traditions. That in this one life- first laid in a manger and then laid before us in four complementary biographies- we have knowledge of God that can be verified in experience. The one God of the Jews has let us in on a secret of the divine life; it is a Triune, tri-personal communion into which we are all invited. The Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit to win our trust and bring us home. We are to be liberated into the life of this amazing God. Jesus is the bridge God built from there to here over a chasm we created.

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<sup>7</sup> *The U.M. Hymnal*: No. 880, “The Nicene Creed.” For treatments of the incarnation, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christianity Believes and Why It Matters* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), Chapter 5, “Who For Us Became Human,” 136-175; Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *Christology* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), Chapter 10, “Divine and Human, 229-261, Chapter 11, “Faith, Holiness, and Virginal Conception,” 262-296; on John Wesley’s orthodoxy Christology, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings: Volume 2: Christ And Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Chapter 1, “Jesus Christ,” 39-57.

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Incarnation is God the Son assuming flesh as Jesus to invade our world, win our trust, and let us in on God’s Trinitarian secret. Is the basic idea a bit clearer now? But how might it happen? Luke as a story about that.<sup>8</sup> So here we turn from what the church teaches to the basis on which it is taught.

### **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>9</sup> From that 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* village- Nazareth, who was at an *identified stage* of Jewish marriage- betrothal. The dowry was paid, the contract signed, but the couple had not yet assumed bed and board because it was sometimes up to a year between the two events. With all this detail something big is up. Nothing special about Mary at this point- just one of the innocent Nazareth girls about to marry shortly after puberty.

Six months ago Gabriel appeared to the old priest Zechariah inside the Jerusalem temple as he burned incense outside the Holy of Holies.<sup>10</sup> But the subsequent appearance to Mary is not at the center of national life but in backwoods Galilee, not to a man with status but to a girl with none. We are now ready to appreciate the details of 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 appearances

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<sup>8</sup> On the common material behind Luke and Matthew’s accounts pointing to an earlier common telling, see Appendix 2 at the end of this manuscript.

<sup>9</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.)

<sup>10</sup> 1:5-25.

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concerning children who will be used of God, so many in fact that a standard pattern of telling was developed. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Hannah and her husband. Into this mold our story is poured.<sup>11</sup> Mary must say *Yes* for the transaction to be sealed by a willing accomplice, but after that God bears the responsibility, and looking back from the far side of resurrection we can say that whatever the interim events, however hard and brutal- including the cross, God was faithful, both to Jesus and to his mother in whose names the most magnificent pieces of art and architecture have been created.

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 without warning is startling, and there is no way to avoid the fear and questions it raises. The other world opened to Mary, and such experiences 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>12</sup> You should not be surprised in worship if God stirs emotions, 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*." Frederick Buechner says this about Gabriel's meeting with Mary:

"She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this

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<sup>11</sup> See Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 18-21.

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to Christian mysticism, see John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2005).

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child. But he had been entrusted with a message.... 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. 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>13</sup>

Some say the words of verses 32 and 33 were spoken; I believe they are songs. The highest angel of heaven, Gabriel, sings of Jesus' destiny to his mother. All the verbs are future, 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 Jewish hopes, the one sent, but not as anyone expected.

There was only one other for whom such titles were used, and he was not a Jew. He lived in Rome with twenty eight legions extended to the borders of the Empire. It was Octavian who 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 divine. Now bearing the title *Augustus Caesar*, Octavian was not only *son of God* but also himself worshiped.<sup>14</sup> The titles the New Testament gives 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 political, 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 more intriguing.<sup>15</sup> The question is, Who is the world's rightful ruler? Who is greater?

We have before us an angel speaking in the future tense about a child who will

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<sup>13</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

<sup>14</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>15</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Nativity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), 48.

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**Luke 1:26-38 ..... 11**

rule the Jews and establish a different sort of Empire than the one currently in operation. 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, by the willingness to suffer violence rather than inflict it, and it is more powerful than the ultimate weapon of its opponent, which is the threat of death. In a visible clash between the two powers one fine Friday morning, Jesus appears to lose, and lose decisively to Rome. As the Creed says, he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.”

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.<sup>16</sup> The life of Jesus is bounded fore and aft by the actions of God, virginal conception and empty tomb. Both are his credentials, and they mark out all that went on between them as the personal action of God in our midst. So the question remains: Who is the rightful ruler? What kind of world does God wish, and what are we doing to alert people that a change of governments 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 near, 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 the matrix of 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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<sup>16</sup> See my *Resurrection: A Pastor’s Reading Of The New Testament Resurrection Stories* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2014) for sermonic essays on the relevant texts.

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Mary was innocent, not naive. She knew where babies came from; in village homes there's no such thing as modern privacy. That she converses with the highest of heaven's messengers 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. In the Greek and Roman myths 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. In the Jewish stories it is typically the old or barren who are restored to be able to conceive. But 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>17</sup> 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 sends; an angel appears, Mary hears and says Yes; the Spirit acts; the Son obeys; and the result is a seed of new life in a dying world. The virginal conception of Jesus is not like the myths; it is not the sexual union of a human mother and a male deity. The child that results from divine action is, with Mary's consent, uniquely related to God.

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

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<sup>17</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 2012*: 63-64).

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for great and mighty deeds.<sup>18</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.

In this wise divine action both sexes are honored. Men by Jesus' gender, women by the fact that if there was to be a real incarnation, only a woman could be the vehicle where such a life is knit together from conception to birth. Jesus did not arrive fully grown; he came out of his mother. Blood and sweat, pain and tears. The profound complementarity of the good creation is upheld. 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>19</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 excluded. So it is for us. It is God's election that is the basis of our salvation, not our strivings. But once we are restored as God's children- once we are reborn from above, we are to display our new family likeness which means a life of love and good deeds as led by the same Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

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 teaching 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.

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<sup>18</sup> The ancient error of Adoptionism.

<sup>19</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

<sup>20</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: Eerdmans, 2002), *The Good Works Reader* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007).

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

A sign is now given Mary for her encouragement and action. She will take a pilgrimage to the hill country to confirm Gabriel’s word concerning her older cousin. Mary will learn she is not alone in dealing with God and the heavenly messenger. 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 an encouragement to believe God ourselves. Faith is deeply personal, but never merely individual or private. 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 listened. God sought her consent; she gladly gave it.<sup>21</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; your word is enough for me.” Though we are not told, this was likely the moment of conception.<sup>22</sup> Gabriel then vanished back behind the veil. Mary then packs her bags and heads to Elizabeth.

**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. But once across the threshold and inside the household of faith, there’s much 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 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 evil is personal and sin pervasive, and on and on. The church is a treasure chest. We believe this faith has great explanatory power and makes sense of life because it’s true. It’s something God started and now backs. What a big claim to make!

**U.M. Articles Of Religion, Article II: Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Very Man**

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<sup>21</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 that She so greatly wished to lend him” (T. Oden, *Word of Life*, 150).

<sup>22</sup> In the next scene, 1:39-56, the pre-born John responds to Jesus’ presence.

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**A. His Person: Who He Is.** One Sentence, Every Line Is *A Yes* And *A No*, Affirmation And Negation

**The Son,** Assumes God The Son: Second Person Of The Holy Trinity  
 1 who is the Word of the Father, Perfect Agent Of Communication, Gk. *logos*, Jn. 1:1-18  
 2 the very and eternal God, No *Junior* God, Full And Equal Deity 1: *true and eternal*  
 3 of *one substance* with the Father, Full And Equal Deity 2: Nicene Creed, Gk. *homousious*  
*Down Into Mary's Womb, Down Into Death, Down Into A Grave*

**B. His Work: What He Did, How He Came To Us.** Gender: Male Human Through A Female Human!

**took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin;** Assumed A Male Human Nature, Lk. 1:26-38  
 1a so that two whole and perfect natures, Result 1: Two Whole Natures  
 b that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, Paraphrase, Echoed In *very God and very man*  
 2a were joined together in one person, Mary's Womb, Result 2: Joined In One Person  
 b never to be divided; Incarnation Never Ends, Permanent In Jesus' Resurrection Body  
 3a whereof is one Christ, Jesus Is Not Two Persons, Result 3: One Messiah In Two Natures  
 b very God and very Man, Echoes Earlier *Godhead* and *Manhood*  
 c who truly suffered: 1) *was crucified*, 2) *dead*, 3) *and buried*, 3 Creedal Phrases  
 Pilate not Named, No Rescue For Jesus

**C. The Why: What We Needed: Gift Of A Healed Relationship Through Costly Forgiveness..**

1 **to reconcile his Father to us,** Our Primary Need = Restored Relationship With God  
 To Show The Fullness Of The Father's Love  
 2 and to be a sacrifice, Means = Jesus' Voluntary Self-Offering As God The Son  
 a not only for original guilt, Problem 1: The Nature And Weight We Inherited  
 b but also for actual sins of men. Problem 2: The Weight Of Sin We Added

**BISHOPS COKE AND ASBURY NOTES IN THE 1798 BOOK OF DISCIPLINE (KJV).**<sup>23</sup>

1. **The Incarnation of the Son in the flesh of Jesus**

John 1:14 And *the Word* [who was God, v.1] was made *flesh*.  
 Phil. 2:7, 8 Christ Jesus [who though it was not robbery to be made equal with God, vv.5-6] was made *in the likeness of men*; and being found in fashion *as a man*, he humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross.  
 1 Tim. 3:16 Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness, *God* was manifested in the *flesh*

2. **Benefits of the Incarnation: Christ as redemption, sacrifice, peace, reconciliation**

Col. 1:14 In whom [God's dear Son] we have *redemption* through his blood, even *the forgiveness of our sins*.  
 Eph. 2:13, 16 Now, *in Christ Jesus*, ye who sometimes were far off, are *made nigh* by *the blood of Christ*. For he is *our peace*,- that he might *reconcile* both [Jews and Gentiles] *unto God* in one body by *the cross*, having slain the enmity thereby.  
 1 Tim. 2:6 Who [Christ Jesus] gave himself a *ransom for all*.

**Pastor Phil's Unofficial Summary:**

**God the eternal Son assumed permanent full humanity as Jesus in Mary's virginal womb. As the Messiah of the Jews he comes to heal the ancient breach of rebellion and sin between us and his Father. The full sacrifice of his daily life comes to a focus in his voluntary suffering and death. In Jesus alone are we invited to come home to the Triune God and then live into and out of that new relationship in the church and world.**

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<sup>23</sup> Transcribed with headings added from Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards In The Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI:1988), 214ff.

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**A List Of Seventeen Traditions Common to Luke And Matthew**

(Since Luke and Matthew are independent, the traditions they share indicate an earlier tradition common to both)

<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.