

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 1:26-38 **“One Of A Kind Call”**

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(4th Sunday of Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 1:26-38 "ONE OF A KIND CALL"

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

[ND] 1) vv.26-27 INTRODUCTION: JOSEPH & 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** Time/Mission/Place/Characters/Name, God Initiates, 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, v.27// Is. 7:10-17, Early Teen, Gk. *parthenos, virginitas ante partum* only
betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, Tribal, Binding(Wife), Deut. 22:23-24, Lk. 1:32-32, 2:5
and the virgin's name was **MARY** (Miriam). *Virgin (2x) Before Name, Moses' Sister, No Pedigree/Status, Between Stages*

2) vv.28-35 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 Does Not Seek Her Father's/Husband's Permission!

[DD] And he came to her and said *charis* (vv.28 [2x], 39b), Alone, God's Abundant Grace (*Charis*)
28 "Hail (Rejoice/*chaire*), O favored (*charis*) one, **the Lord is with you!**" Greeting Emphasizes God's Gracious Choice For Her Mission
Task! Zech. 3:14 (?), Ruth 2:4, Judg. 6:12

29a But she was greatly troubled (vexed) at this saying (*word*), *word = logos, Real Fear,* **2. Immediate Reaction**
b 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.

30a And *the angel* said to her Initiative With God, Named By Mother, Focus Is On The Child!
Announced As If Already A Fact, Birth Affirms Humanity vs. Docetism

b 1) "Do not be afraid, Mary, 1:13, **3-4. Name Of Person/Reassurance**
7 Predictions 2) for you have found favor (*charis*) with God, 3x, God's Work Through Agents, //v.28b, Gen. 6:9(LXX)
31 (1) Son 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*). Is. 7:14// Gen. 17:19 **6. Name Given By God To Mary**
vv.30-32, 3x: God, Most High, Lord God

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

5 Futures 5 Future Verbs, Person: Who He Is, Work: Messianic Identity, Actions
32a (3) great a He *will be* great, Mic. 5:4, Acts 15:16, **7. Prediction Of Child's Destiny**
b (4) Son of Most High// a' and he *will be* called the Son of the Most High; p.v., Dt. 10:17, Political, Messiah Language
c (5) Messiah b **And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,** 1:17, 27
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." Creed, Acts 15:16, Is. 11:1-3, Ps. 89:26-36
Dan. 7:14. Jesus Is Ultimate Act Of God, Key To History, Resurrection

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

34 And Mary said to *the angel*, Mary Confirms Description With Testimony, Virginitly As An Obstacle
No O.T. Precedent, Pragmatic Request, Dialogs With Angel!
Q "How shall this be, since I have no husband (lit. "know not a man")?" Not if, **8. Objection: 3 Answers**
Not Miracle Of Healing But Creation, Unprecedented 2) Mary's Part

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

A Jesus' Conception Greater Than John's, Explains His Future
35a And *the angel* said to her, "God Is Not Father As Mary Is Mother" (Nolland, 1:58) **9a. Sign 1: Religious Experience:**
Miracle = 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
How = Trinitarian Divine Agency, Not Narrated // Adam 3:38
b 1' *Therefore* the child to be born will be called holy, //v.32, 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, Acts 9:20 Raised
God Intervenes To Fix History = Willing Personal Agency, From Margins

1') vv.36-38 CONCLUSION: MARY'S CONSENT, ANGEL DEPARTS. //s, Superior To John

36 And *behold,* your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son; a-b-c, **9b. Sign 2: Objective Confirmation:**

37 and this is **THE SIXTH MONTH** with her who was called barren./ *Behold* (3x, vv.31, 36, 38), Circumstances, Call To Faith!
For any word will not be impossible with **GOD.** //(lit. "any word [*rhema*] will not be impossible with God."), 18:27, Gen. 18:14
rhema = promised event, Jesus Is God's Act!

38a And **MARY** said, "How Can This Be?" Becomes "Let It Be!" Active & Passive Mary, 1:42 On Pregnancy
2) Mary's Part "Behold, I am the handmaid (servant/slave) of the Lord;/" a'-b'-c', Not Man's, Is. 49:3, 50:4, 10; 52:13 **10. Response Of Assent**

b [ND] let it be to me according to your word. // 1:45, 11:27-28, Model Disciple: *Submission To God's Purposes*, Hears & 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 Christians part company over Mary. Protestants teach Mary was virginal at conception, not in birth, and not afterwards as she and Joseph conceived children. The Catholics and Orthodox hold that her virginity was preserved during birth and afterwards in a celibate marriage with other children being Jesus' cousins (4th 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. Mary has a unique role; Jesus' human nature was formed in her in a true incarnation of God the Son. She was also a sinner in need of all her Son came to offer, which climaxes in his cross, resurrection, ascension, session, and sending of the Spirit. Blessed 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 as a disciple.

The surface structure is a 7:1 ring with a single center (1-2a-b-c-b'-a'-1'). A narrative frame (vv.26-27 // v.38b) around a dialogic core (vv.28-38a). 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 thought unit. The center is Gabriel's prophecy (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 by the Holy Spirit with a destiny as Israel's rightful ruler (Messiah). The ten part literary form is the same as John's annunciation with Jesus superior at every point. The O.T. announcement of a surprise child is the paradigm. There are three exchanges between Gabriel and Mary (vv.28-29, 30-34, 35-38a).

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 Davidide; twice it states she is virginal. Right 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" (v.28b). 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 husband gave permission for the recruitment! Jesus' destiny is outlined in vv.32-33. The five future verbs (*will be* [3x], *will give*, *will reign*) make clear these verses are prophecy. The ancient covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:12-26) will come to pass. Jesus' rule will have no end. We are headed, not towards a democracy, but a Christocracy.

Since Mary understands life, her question, "How shall this be, since I—as yet— have no husband?" assumes a natural conception as if to say, "But we are not yet intimate," to which Gabriel responds with a promised encounter with the non-sexual generative power of the Spirit. A Holy Spirit means a holy child (one set apart), and the power of the Most High brings God the Son near. It's a one-of-a-kind event, and in that sense analogous to Jesus' resurrection from the dead at the far end of his life. An unused womb is filled, an empty tomb left behind. That God is fully able is clear from the sign of Elizabeth's prior conception. Mary's unforgettable assent follows. She willingly and in full faith says *Yes*. Gabriel disappears, and the world is forever changed. God exercises a hidden, powerful influence.

THE INFANCY NARRATIVES OF MATTHEW 1-2, LUKE 1-2	Matthew	Luke
Genealogy	1:1-17	3:23-38
Annunciation: Conception of John the Baptist		1:5-25
Annunciation: Conception of Jesus		1:16-38
Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth		1:39-56
Birth of Jesus	1:18-25	2:7
Annunciation to the Shepherds		2:8-15
Adoration of the Shepherd		2:16-20
Infant Jesus at the Temple		2:21-38
Star of Bethlehem	2:1-2	
Adoration of Magi	2:3-12	
Flight into Egypt	2:13-15	
Massacre of the Innocents	2:16-18	

MATERIALS IN BOTH MATTHEW AND LUKE, A COMMON SOURCE?	Matthew	Luke
1. Jesus had two human parents: Mary and Joseph	1:18	1:27
2. Mary and Joseph were engaged -but not married- when Mary became pregnant.	1:18	1:27, 34
3. Joseph was a descendant of King David of Israel	1:16, 20	1:27, 32, 2:4
4. Mary conceived and became pregnant while she was still a virgin	1:18	1:27, 34
5. The Holy Spirit of God caused Mary's conception, not the union of Joseph and Mary	1:18, 20, 23, 25	1:34-35
6. The news of Mary's pregnancy was initially unexpected and troublesome.	To Joseph	To Mary
7. Mary and Joseph remained together in spite of her pre-marriage pregnancy, where marriage is not mentioned but surely implied.	1:24, 25	2
8. An angel visits Jesus' parents to announce the birth.	1:20-23 (Zechariah)	1:30-35 (Mary)
9. An angel gives the baby a name- Jesus.	1:21	2:11
10. Through angels Jesus is defined as <i>Savior</i> .	2:21	2:11
11. Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king of Judea.	2:1	1:5
12. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.	2:1	2:4-6
13. Jesus will be king of the Jews. Jesus is the rightful Messiah	2:2, 4	1:32-33, 2:11
14. Jesus birth is understood in light of Jewish prophecies	Multiple	Multiple
15. Birth happens after Mary and Joseph have come to live together	1:24-25	2:5-6
16. Unexpected visitors are supernaturally summoned to visit Jesus.	Magi	Shepherds
17. Jesus, through born in Bethlehem, was raised in Nazareth.	2:23	2:39

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

ONE OF A KIND CALL

“...let it be to me according to your word.”

God seeks our willing assent, our trust and surrender.

LUKE 1 : 3 8

Children and Christmas go together, don't they? Christian faith starts with *baby Jesus*, or— perhaps more technically— *Jesus the embryo in a virginal womb, truly God and truly man, unique as one person in two inseparable natures, God the Son coming to us as one of us through his virgin mother.*

But then, how do you explain that to a five year old caught up in the secular, sacred wonder of Christmas? You don't; you let them enjoy it all, build family traditions of food and service, take them to church, set up a manger scene, sing the classic carols, read from Matthew's and Luke's infancy stories at supper, and wait to give explanations as questions arise.

Christmas and children go together, and nowhere more so than in the bath robe dramas that fill social halls and sanctuaries in the weeks before December 25. Unbelief is suspended; for a moment we see the babe in the manger through the eyes of a child. The following is told by a young father:

“My 5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, were participating in a nativity play. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, ‘I'm a sheep, what are you?’ Olivia said, ‘I'm an angel.’

The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, and repeated the question, ‘I'm a sheep, what are you?’

‘I'm Mary.’

Realizing he was now face to face with the lead, our friend

needed to justify his role. ‘It's hard being a sheep, you know,’ he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old with a big part.

‘Yes,’ said Claire, ‘but it's also hard being a virgin, you know.’”¹

I think the Virgin Mary in heaven nodded at that moment and smiled down upon little Claire with beam of light. After all, her well scripted peasant life got very complicated because she said Yes to a one-of-a-kind project. “It’s hard being a virgin, you know, especially when God elects you for a special project to change the world.”

And that is what today’s story is all about. How is God going to get us the help we most need down here in a good world gone sour and in a beautiful place eat up with ugly? If, in the mystery of the Triune communion, there was an intent to enter creation to heal and save it forever, how would it happen? Who the Sender? Who the Agent? Who the Companion? Through a careful reading and an attention to detail, we may gain some insights.

Naturalism says there’s only one world, the one you see, the one you measure in light years or nanoseconds, and that’s simply all there is, so get used to it. It only accepts a certain kind of knowledge and is skeptical about knowledge not obtained under laboratory controls, and I understand the necessity of the method. Oddly enough, that approach to how we know is not itself subject to the same standards of verification. There is no scientific way to prove that only science has access to real knowledge. You can’t put a theory of knowledge in a test tube. Life’s bigger than that, and we validly know all sort of things by testimony and observation and experience and inference that we cannot prove if only the strictest standards are allowed, say that it be replicable and measurable and described in equations.

But the Christian, and also the Jew and the Muslim– at least at this point– agree that strict naturalism rules out too much of what’s real and that our interactions include not only a physical world but also an invisible world that

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

we have constant interactions with it as well: with God, with angels good and bad, with the faithful who've lived and died. We live in a more relationally rich world than some allow. Sometimes I keenly sense and can almost hear my Grandmother Lida and my old friend Mike cheering for me from the stands as I run my course, "Keep going!" Unbidden encouragements come my way; prayers are answered in ways that someone had to be paying attention. I pray for people, and sometimes the outcomes are startling.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Luke starts with both worlds and their interactions. There is first the ground level world of regions and villages, Galilee and Nazareth, lineages and tribes like *the house of David*, young men and women with names like Miriam and Joseph, and they are between the two formal stages of a Jewish marriage. It's a very big deal. Negotiations are done, the bride price paid by Joseph to Mary's father. The marriage contract is signed, the betrothal complete. They are now legally married. But in an odd turn of Jewish custom, they will not consummate the union and take up bed and board for up to a year when she's taken in a festive procession to his home,² and it is in that gap that Gabriel's visitation occurs. The timing is precise. Legally married, not yet intimate.

Now if you— as a skeptic— believe in explaining everything only by human to human interaction, you have an easy, sympathetic answer. The eager young couple acted against custom— understandably so— and the church retrofitted a later explanation of a virginal conception and Joseph's difficulties with the pregnancy because of who Jesus was later seen to be. Scrub the early history and present the real meaning of events for the great hero. The later second century idea that Mary was an adulteress though an link with a Roman soldier named *Panthera* is a hostile form of this same argument used several centuries later in Jewish and Christian arguments for and against Jesus. All natural,

² See Steve Rudd, "Marriage in the Bible and Ancient Marriage and Jewish Wedding Customs," www.bible.ca/marriage/ancient-jewish-three-stage-weddings-and-marriage-customs-ceremony-in-the-bible.

different Dad, a Jesus with DNA from a legionnaire, and maybe it was forced.³ Anything it appears but what Luke plainly teaches: a virginal conception.

Luke’s account involves two related worlds: one visible, the other invisible unless opened from the other side. And if there is a God of the character that Jews and Christians present, Luke’s story is plausible and consistent with the God of Israel’s earlier interactions with several couples with critical offspring, say Abraham and Sarah with Isaac, Jacob and Rachel with twelve sons, Manoah and his wife with Samson, Elkanah and Hannah with Samuel.⁴ So in addition to the report about geography and culture, Luke adds a dimension as the other world makes a move in our direction, “In the sixth month (i.e. of Elizabeth’s pregnancy), “the angel Gabriel was sent... to a virgin... and the virgin’s name was Mary.” This is divine revelation, God taking the initiative to send a messenger, Gabriel, Something big is unfolding.

We all have the experience of sensing someone near before they appear; you just know! Also the regular experience of someone walking through a door into our presence, sometimes startling you when they come up quietly from behind. Only here the presence was angelic at the highest level and the door invisible, so there’s a lot hidden in the little phrase, “And he came to her and said....” We presume an uncloaking from his reality to hers, and to this an audio track is added. It was a waking vision and extended conversation in three parts. The biggest, baddest warrior archangel in all creation, with powers we cannot imagine, shows up for a conversation with a Jewish peasant girl. How cool is that? She didn’t invite him. He appeared at God’s behest.

“Rejoice, O graced lady, the Lord is with you!” which is a clue she’s about to receive a mission. When the Lord is *with you*, it’s means there’s something to be done. Miriam has been chosen, elected, and now called. Did not apply. Did not see it coming. Got the phone call, and life changed. Because of the

³ For a refutation, see Ben Witherington, “Did Jesus Found A Dynasty—James Tabor’s new book,” www.beliefnet.com/columnists/bibleandculture/2006/04/did-jesus-found-a-dynasty.

⁴ Gen. 30:22-24, Judg. 13:3-25, 1 Sam. 1:1-20.

limited pool of names for Jewish boys and girls in that day, it's likely there was another early teen Virgin Mary in the village.⁵ But Gabriel knew which one and which house.

Now Nazareth is *nowheresville*, not mentioned in the O.T. or ancient literature. And she a young woman with no status, no priestly lineage, a peasant in an occupied land. She's now the legal property of Joseph, and she expects a life like other Jewish village women: hard work, one pregnancy after another, deaths of newborns, famine, infectious disease, dead by your early thirties unless you were one of the odd ones who lived decades more. And so it remains in poor villages around the globe; I've seen them recently in Kenya. Mary has many sorority sisters, and for them *she's one of us* and thus a sign of hope. "If God could use *little-ole-her*, then why not *little-ole-me*?" It's a dangerous question, one God intended.

There is a range of primary religious experience from the mild to the shattering, say on a scale of 1 to 10. At Level 1 you feel a warm glow and an urge to do some kind deed; at Level 10 you die as by nuclear radiation.⁶ At the lower levels God is seeing if you notice the quiet approach, say a thought or a warning, perhaps a bit of Scripture highlighted as a personal telegram. Not a lot of voltage because that would be overkill. God whispers or hints, and I pay attention, often wondering how much I've missed. But higher up the scale, phenomena increase, and so I place Mary's encounter at a 5 or 6 because much above that people shake, fall down, or lose consciousness in a trance that may last for hours or days. Mary's emotions are scrambled, her mind set spinning, verse 29: "But she was *greatly troubled* at this saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be." Another realm of Reality intruded, and if culture shock happens in a foreign country where little is the same, how

⁵ For the research on Jewish names and their frequencies, see Gary Habermas, "Jesus' Burial Tomb," garyhabermas.com/articles/The_Lost_Tomb_of_Jesus/losttombofjesus_response; also his video lecture, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbn7q5J_Vmg.

⁶ Ex. 3:20, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

much more the disturbance when heaven comes calling?

That Gabriel opened the next round with, “Do not be afraid, Mary,” indicates that fear and anxiety were all over her: heart rate up, elevated blood pressure, cortisol and adrenaline pouring into the bloodstream, fight or flight on full alert. He then repeats the substance of the initial greeting: that she is *graced and favored* by the One who’s chosen her. Only then is the purpose revealed with an initial *Behold*, which is a call for full attention. The announcement is in three parts: 1) You will conceive; 2) the child is male, a son, something known then only at birth– no ultrasound; 3) you– and not Joseph– will give him a name already chosen, *Jesus*, a common form of *Joshua*, which means– roughly speaking– *God saves*. There was likely already more than one Jesus in Nazareth; it was as common a name as our Bill or Steve, even more so. And I note that Gabriel did not ask either Joseph or her father’s permission before recruiting Mary. Legally she’s Joseph’s, but she belongs to God. Trump doesn’t have to get China’s permission to talk to Taiwan’s President; God does not have to get any man’s permission to talk to anyone’s wife or daughter. Whatever social customs dictate, we are alongside one another, and God has full access to all his children.

It’s important how much air time Gabriel consumes. And as soon as he utters the name *Jesus* for the first time, he goes into a prophetic riff on his saving destiny in two parts: 1) who he is, and 2) what he does, or– as Christian teachers have come to designate it- his person and work, because what Jesus does comes from who he is, and he is like no other. And all five verbs are in the future tense, “He will be great, and he will be called *the Son of the Most High God*,” with *Son* as a code work for *Agent*, the one who is sent on the business of the one who sends him.

And in that world of the ancient year east, sons did this for their fathers with full authority; they travel to transact business; to deal with them is to deal with their father.⁷ And that is the sense in which God the Son is Son, not that

⁷ Raymond Essoe, “Shaliah: An Introduction to the Law of Agency,” www.christianmonotheism.com/media/text/Raymond%20Essoe%20--%20

he is of another generation or younger but that he is the One sent, as when a Jewish grain dealer sends his Son to negotiate trade deals.

Metaphors are tricky; you have to decide what the comparison affirms and what it denies. In God, Father and Son are not older and younger, not of different generations in time, and the Son is eternally and not temporally generated; the Father was never without the Son, or the Son apart from the Father, and in the Triune godhead neither are male in our sense since God does not have a gendered body. Father and Son are revealed metaphors from the human family, and it is as important to understand what they do not teach as what they do, and I assure you it will give you a *pain in the brain*. That a Jewish father sends a son and a companion on a trip with full authority to represent family interests was understood by all, and so it's a ready comparison for God's actions. That God the Father sent God the Son into Mary's womb as Jesus the male by means of the Holy Spirit as companion builds on that same model. It is Trinitarian cooperation along with a differentiation of roles.

And if this is who Jesus is, *his person*, then what does he do, *his work*? He will sit on the throne promised to King David long ago. Jesus rules, "he will reign over the house of Jacob forever," and in case you missed the full import of *forever*, the third line makes it clear, "and of his kingdom *there will be no end*," so it's definitely not an earthy arrangement where rulers change one after another: one President, then the next; one king, then the next; one dictator, then the next. No, the succession of power is now gone. Only one ruler in the future, and this is the one Mary bears. Jewish hope opens up into cosmic kingship, and is that not what we pray for each Sunday? "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it already is above." We have a very fine king.

Mary's first response to Gabriel's greeting was inward emotion and thought, but in response to his second speech, she answers with a frank question. Don't you love it when a President or Pope squats down to look a child in the face and hear their question? Power stooping to powerlessness, wisdom stooping to innocence. A peasant Jewish girl, knowing how babies are made,

responds with a technical question, “*How* shall this be, since I know not a man.” What was said earlier, that she was a virgin, is now confirmed by her testimony.

Now at this point Mary may still be thinking all this will naturally flow from her coming union with Joseph. There is no biblical precedent for a virginal conception, so it can’t be considered unless revealed. It’s a new thing for a new covenant, an event that fully includes Jesus in our humanity but with an important twist: no man takes the credit. The only adequate explanation for Jesus is that he is God’s initiative, but in a way that involves cooperative human agency, and since babies only come from women, Mary is chosen and called and yes— even consulted— before history’s biggest adventure begins.⁸

It’s not the *rent a womb* of modern surrogacy; the transaction is not financial. It is God working through the receptive to do what must be done if the world is to have a future different from the present malaise. And it must be a female who is approached, since only they have the biological incubator necessary to manufacture an infant, and the child— in order for both sexes to be embraced— must be male. The order of the good creation is not bypassed but used in a way only God could use it. And it is not a negation of human sexuality, only a recognition that in the work to be done, only God can do up close and personal as one of us. The Father sends, the Son goes, and the Holy

⁸ For fuller treatments of the virginal conception as the means of incarnation, see Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992), Chapter 5, “The Manner of God’s Coming,” 282-298; Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought To Believe: An Introduction To Christian Doctrine Through The Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), Chapter 7, “Believing in the Virgin Birth,” 99-110); N.T. Wright, “God’s Way of Acting,” www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=17; “Our Lord’s Virgin Birth,” www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/decemberweb-only/150-42.0. For the current state of ecumenical dialog on Mary, see the work of Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT), “Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith And Life,” *First Things*, www.firstthings.com/article/2009/11/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life.

Spirit brings it to pass in the darkness of a teenage abdomen. The arrival of Jesus is a fully Trinitarian event, and Mary is the first to experience this new, fuller revelation of who God of Israel is. She welcomes Jesus into her depths where his human nature will be woven in the matrix of her womb: her food his food, her drink his drink, the sound track of life her abdominal gurglings and the rhythms of her heartbeat. Just like each of us in our first ten lunar months.

How genius of God, to bring a boy child through a virgin mother so that both genders might be fully embraced while— at the same time— excluding the prideful claim of men to be responsible for everything important. How fitting it all is! God the Son will come as Jesus, sent by the Father and accompanied by the Spirit at conception. His microscopic beginning and then his dying as a mature man not only embraces both genders but the full range of life’s ages and stages. All of life is be embraced, and if he dies and goes to where the dead are before his resurrection, no one can say, “I’ve been somewhere he hasn’t. I am out of the reach of his love.” The Savior is for embryos and the aged and all in between, for men and women, boys and girls, the living and the dead, and so for all God wishes to call to the new way, which is everyone.

I saw something this week I’d not seen before. Mary’s *How* question has two answers, not one, the first concerning her being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit for God’s creative act of non-sexual generation, which C.S. Lewis described this way, “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.”⁹ What a great quote. Jesus is not the best of evolution but the best of divine revelation. He came down; he did not climb up with us from the goo.

That is the obvious answer, but the second answer is the sign of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s restored abilities, a sign Mary did not request. It was a bonus. And if God can do the lesser thing, then surely the new thing—a virginal conception— is not out of reach, and so Gabriel closes his third speech with an affirmation, “For any word will not be impossible with God,” meaning *what God can say, God can do*. God’s promise about what will occur is its own

⁹ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.

guarantee, since God is true to his word and needs no outside verification.

It ended as quickly as it began, “And the angel departed from her.” The other world withdrew back into invisibility. Mary blinked and wondered, “What just happened? We will have to wait and see.”

If there is to be a real incarnation in which God the Son assumes human flesh for the sake of our full restoration, how else might it happen in a way that involves both genders and stretches across the whole of the human life cycle from conception to adult death? If Jesus is not genuinely human, he cannot save us, since what he did not assume, he cannot restore. And if he is not at the same time full deity, then he has neither the power nor wisdom to save anyone in the ultimate sense, thus one person with two natures. God may— and does— dwell in our humanity by the infilling of the Holy Spirit, but that does not give us a second divine nature as a part of our person. We have a fallen human nature and a new inward divine presence, but Jesus had a sinless human nature and a full divine nature simultaneously and without confusion.

Now— and this is a new idea to many— the radical obedience of Jesus was not to draw on his divine nature, present though it was, but to remain in constant dependence on the Word of the Father and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. None of his moves were independent, and the prayer of his mother was his own, “Let it be to me according to your Word.” One possible image is to see Jesus voluntary limitation as fighter with one hand tied behind his back. Another is to see him as a blind man with the Holy Spirit providing constant guidance and illumination. So when a healing happened, it is not his divine nature taking over in an oscillation from his human nature, it is the human Jesus following the Father’s direction and trusting the Spirit, his constant companion, to supply life and creative power.¹⁰

“And Mary said,” mimicking Gabriel, “Behold,” and then shaped her response to match his in the same three parts: 1) A bold *Behold*, 2) a statement

¹⁰ Jesus testimony is, "I can do nothing *on My own initiative*. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30, NASB).

of fact, 3) then a statement about God’s word. She is in sync at a deep level, and what she offers is herself in two modes: active and passive. The active is first as a declaration of surrender, “I am the female slave of the Lord,” and that is not a demeaning title since the male form was used by Joshua, David, and the Prophets of Israel.¹¹ To be a slave of men is lowly; to be God’s loyal servant is the highest honor. But then comes the equally important passive, a recognition she cannot make any of this happen. As a handmaid she waits for God’s initiative, “let it be to me according to your word.” A lady in waiting.

CONCLUSION

If America has a national storyteller, it’s Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion* fame.¹² You can’t listen to his Saturday evening folk liturgy with its service music and standard parts without learning that Keillor is haunted by the imagery, music, and thought forms of the faith, particularly in its Minnesota Lutheran particularities. But Keillor recently make the assertion you don't have to believe in Jesus to have a great Christmas, and here’s his reasoning:

“Although you may decide that instead of Christmas carols you are going to hold hands and breathe in unison, Christmas will still live deep in the cockles of your heart– or actually in your neo-cortex, stored as zillions of neuron impulse.... It's [your brain] that sends tears to your eyes when you smell the saffron cookies that your grandma used to make or you sing *Silent Night*. So Christmas is: number one lights, number two food, number three song, number four being with people you like. You need no more.”

But if Keilor is our national storyteller, then perhaps Dr. Tim Keller is our national pastor, and he refused to let Keilor’s claims go unchallenged:

“Keillor is saying it doesn't matter whether you believe in God or

¹¹ David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 83.

¹² Sam Anderson, “A Prairie Home Conundrum,” www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/assessment/2006/06/a_prairie_home_conundrum.

not. You can still hold hands and breathe in unison. All the good feelings of Christmas are just a reaction in our brain. But here's why that doesn't work. I know enough about Garrison Keillor to know that he's very upset with cruelty and prejudice. But if it's true there is no God, if no supernatural or miracles, if everything is a function of natural causes, then it's also true that love, and joy, and even cruelty and prejudice are just chemical reactions in our brain. But if it's true that everything is just chemistry, how can you say there's a moral difference between love and cruelty, between kissing or killing? They're both nothing but neuro-chemical responses. So if there's no God, if Christmas is all about lights, songs, and being with nice people and your neo-cortex going crazy about it, I don't see how Keillor can say there's something wrong with cruelty and prejudice. He can't do it. Without the theology, you lose the core meaning of Christmas.”¹³

And the theology– the God dimension– is what Luke is so clear about. There never has been a New Testament or a Creed of the Church that did not include the virginal conception by Mary and the Holy Spirit. Your world may not allow for such an involved God, but don't tell us it doesn't matter; we know better; it's part of the apostolic package. It is the chosen means of God's coming, and the life of Jesus is bounded by two great acts it takes God to explain, namely his virginal conception and his third day resurrection. He filled an empty womb and left an empty tomb. He came through a door marked *No Entry* and left through a door marked *No Exit*. The body formed in Mary's matrix was the same one that was hung on a Friday tree and experienced a Sunday rising. It's what Christmas is all about, so love and obey and seek the God who did such a crazy, wonderful thing for us all.

¹³ Edited, PreachingToday.com search under Luke 1:26-38.
