

Luke 1, 26 through 38.

The birth of Jesus foretold.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David.

And the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one.

The Lord is with you.

But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greetings this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin?

And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son.

And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am a servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word.

And the angel departed from her.

Thanks, Lee.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we need your help this morning.

Lord, as we look again at a story that's familiar to most of us, that we've heard year after year, Lord, we ask that you would open our eyes in wonder and amazement at your hand at work, at your love on display, and just as your glory revealed, Lord, would you give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to admire your great work and worth this morning.

And Lord, would you help us to respond as we ought?

We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.

Sometimes I forget how beautiful the lake is.

You know, I used to live up in Buffalo for about 10 years and my friend Lee and I would travel down to fish, you know, sometimes when it was warm, sometimes when it was cold like this and frozen over.

And we'd hit the 86 bridge and be kind of anticipating the 86 bridge, especially if we were crossing it in daylight and we weren't here really early.

And, you know, you would look to the right and to the left and be like, there it is, you know, and just kind of be, you know, not necessarily amazed that it's Chautauqua, but, you know, just...

admire the beauty of the lake.

And most of the time now, I just drive around, you know, doing my thing, not noticing it anymore.

You know, I just walk out of Wegmans and don't even notice that you can kind of see the lake from the exit of Wegmans there.

But every now and then, you know, like when I'm driving down Big Tree or I'm at the park with my kids, I'll see it again with amazement and appreciation, right?

Like it's really amazing.

a beautiful thing to see this body of water, the trees, the sun, everything that God created.

It's just really a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Christmas is a lot like that.

You don't have to be a Christian to see and admire the beauty of the story of Christmas.

It's one of the most beautiful stories ever told from top to bottom.

And yet we have so many other things that compete for our attention, that vie for our attention this time of year, that it's easy to miss.

It's easy to forget about.

the beauty and the glory of Christmas, in particular, the Christmas story.

So let's take some time this morning to really look at it together, Lord willing, with amazement and appreciation again.

You know, Christmas is a story that's first and foremost about God, but it's also about and shows us how we ought to respond to God's glory and greatness, right?

So we see God's glory and greatness on display, but we also see

a number of different characters interacting with God and his hand directly at work in humankind.

Today we'll see in Mary that when we behold God's majesty and meekness, we ought to respond with reflection, belief, and submission.

Reflection, belief, and submission.

Two words are really acceptable today.

That last one, submission,

is kind of a difficult word for us as human beings and especially as modern human beings.

But let's take a look.

Let's take a look at Gabriel and God's message through Gabriel to Mary.

As Gabriel reveals God's plan to Mary, first thing we see her doing in this passage is reflecting, right?

Reflecting on who God is and what he said to her.

Luke does a really good job throughout his book and a really thorough job, I should say,

at laying the scene or setting the scene and really laying like the historical foundation for the story of Christmas.

He gives us a lot of historical detail, location, time, different characters' names, not only of the people that are involved, but like prominent people that were in power at the time so we can place the events at history.

And this little story of Gabriel coming to talk to Mary and foretell what God's about to do in and through Mary

is no different.

He sets the scene with a lot of details.

And as he, again, as he seems to love to do, he tells us like where Jesus is going to be born, who he's going to be born to, and some of the details around that.

We're first told, one of the first details that we see here is the scandalous news that Gabriel, the angel, was sent to this region, this backwater region of Galilee, as opposed to like the religious and the cultural center of Jerusalem, right?

If you were

writing a story at the time, and you were talking about somebody of great importance that was going to come to the earth and change human history from then on.

Galilee was not the region that you would have chosen to set his origin story.

It's a backwater town of little importance.

Not only was he born to this backwater region, Chautauqua County in the U.S., but he was born to the town of Nazareth.

Nazareth was so small and insignificant that prior to 1962, we had no archaeological record of Nazareth pre-gospels.

So what that means is that nothing happened there prior to Jesus being born there.

Nobody argues that it wasn't, you know, a historical place.

Just nothing ever happened there.

And it was between two port cities, which, you know, indicated and probably meant that a lot of shady people dwelt there in Nazareth, right?

Easy access.

It's kind of like I was watching a documentary on some weird stuff that happened in Erie.

I mean, there's a lot of weird stuff that happens in Erie, PA.

But some really abnormal stuff that was happening in Erie, PA.

And they talked about one of the reasons that weird stuff happens in Erie is because you could be in three different states in the matter of five minutes from Erie if you drive fast enough.

So a lot of access to getting away with stuff that you're not supposed to.

Nazareth was kind of like that, right?

It was just shady spot, easy access to get away and conduct shady business.

Not the most upright, even one of the people talking about Jesus, when they find out who Jesus was, they're like, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Like it's a small town, nobody knew about it, right?

Had hardly ever heard of it and prone to shady dealings.

And in this too small to be mentioned town, out in the sticks, right, the angel Gabriel comes to this young woman named Mary.

Historians, given her status as a virgin and given the region that she lived in, put Mary at no older than 14, possibly as young as 12, which was typical marriage age at that time.

You know, when you're only living to like 35, 40, that's like half your lifetime.

So

It wasn't uncommon for people to get married really young in what we would consider to be like preteens, that timeframe.

She would have been uneducated, illiterate, probably from a large family.

Kent Hughes, reflecting on this passage, says this, from all indicators, her life would not be extraordinary.

She would marry humbly, give birth to numerous poor children, never travel farther than a few miles from home, and one day die like thousands of others before her.

A nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.

And yet, God comes to her, right?

God comes and visits her and bestows upon her this incredible blessing of carrying and giving birth to the Son of God.

It's true, you know, certain churches, certain denominations make too much of Mary.

You know, translating this greeting as Hail Mary, full of grace is not a great translation.

It's a translation of a translation and there's been some doctoring done in between there.

The emphasis is clearly not on Mary and her spiritual condition prior to God coming to her.

The emphasis is on God, right?

And his great mercy and his great compassion and empathy

in coming to visit her.

She receives salvation from the one that she's carrying just like everyone else.

She received the Holy Spirit, we're told in Acts, at Pentecost just like the other disciples.

Mary wasn't chosen because she was a saint.

God in his majestic meekness chose to bestow favor on her

even in her humble condition, because that's who our God is, right?

He sees the humble and the lowly, and he shows favor on those.

And even while some make too much of Mary, I do think that we Protestants tend to make too little of her as well, right?

Mary recognizes in verse 48 that we'll look at on Christmas Eve a little bit closer.

that all generations from then on will call her blessed.

You know, it's an incredible privilege to be the one who carries the incarnate son of God, right?

Who we would assume helped to shape the very physical appearance of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whose face probably most resembles that of Jesus's, to be the one who held him and nursed him and cared for him as a child.

And if you and I, right,

we'd almost certainly pick someone who is rich or good looking or powerful.

You know, surely somebody who's loving and kind are gonna take good care of us, but at least comfortably middle class, right?

So we don't have to go through too much suffering and we can be at least somewhat comfortable, but not our God, right?

He chooses a nobody from a nothing town in the middle of nowhere who may not be the most stunningly gorgeous on the outside, but as we see in this scene is exceptionally beautiful

on the inside.

And this comes out first in her reaction to Gabriel.

So as Gabriel comes and greets her, verse 29 tells us, but she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

We're not told exactly why Mary was troubled by Gabriel's greeting.

We know that from how Gabriel appeared to Zachariah and to Daniel, going back to the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel,

that Gabriel's presence and the way he just kind of dropped in was typically pretty troubling and alarming, right?

These guys fell on their face before him, pretty frightened that he was there.

So maybe he appeared that way to Mary and Mary was in a better spiritual state or condition to receive that, or maybe he

tempered how he appeared to her.

We don't know.

But he at least appeared to her in an unusual way, and she was greatly troubled.

I also think she was greatly troubled, or it seems at least from the scene in its entirety, that she had enough self-awareness and humility to recognize that she's not your typical highly favored one, right?

She's not someone that you would typically describe as being

highly favored, this poor young lady in the middle of nowhere.

It'd be like an angel appearing to a teenager in the roughest part of Jamestown and just appearing and saying, greetings, highly favored one.

You'd be like, really, me?

But that's not how she responds, right?

She doesn't immediately say to Gabriel, I think you got it wrong, try again, right?

Go knock on another door.

Or she doesn't jump right to interrogating him.

She tries to discern.

She stops, right?

Literally, the word here means that she pondered.

She stopped, she took a beat to reflect on what he had said to her thoughtfully.

She heard God's messenger, she heard what he was communicating, and she took a minute to truly listen and to hear what he had said to her before she opened her mouth.

In contrast to Zachariah, who immediately, how do I know?

How am I gonna know that this is true?

I wonder, do we have any time in our day anymore where we ponder and reflect on what God has said to us?

I'm a believer here this morning.

God is still speaking through the gospel.

He's still speaking through the Christmas story.

Have you ever considered thoughtfully and carefully the story that he lays out for you that he's done and is doing in people's lives?

Have you taken some time to examine its claims and what it would mean for you and what it would mean in history if it's true?

Believers, you know, I don't know that there's a day that goes by where we all don't have some form of headphones or speaker blaring at us almost constantly, right?

Do we have space in our day, in our routine, to reflect and ponder on what God is communicating to us through his word?

Where we're just quiet enough to reflect on the things that we've heard preached, taught,

that we've read ourselves from the scripture and consider what they might mean in general, right, in history, but also what they might mean for us.

God loves to bring beauty and hope to the lowly, to you and me.

Do you have the humility to regularly listen to him and ponder, what am I mean?

Gabriel moves beyond a simple greeting here and Mary moves beyond simply reflecting as well into belief.

Let's look at verses 30 to 33.

And the angel said to her, do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the son of the most high and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.

So we see here that Mary recognizes Gabriel's messianic message, meaning while she was almost certainly illiterate and unable to read the scriptures for herself, she still would have been familiar with the stories, especially the covenants, right?

God's promise to his people through the teaching at the synagogue, right?

So she would have went and heard these things taught, especially

most importantly, the prophecies of the Messiah and this messianic passage in Samuel.

She was familiar with them enough to recognize a few things in Gabriel's message and to receive them.

One, the name Jesus.

It wasn't an uncommon name, but significantly it means savior or salvation, right?

So it's not, again, there were other Jesuses out there, but to have this designated as his name by Gabriel was significant in regards to God's salvation and

and his plan of salvation.

And then in verses 32 and 33, we have basically a compilation of all of the major elements of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7, verses 8 to 16.

So 2 Samuel 7 is a crucial passage to understanding the nature and the role of the Messiah, who the Messiah was and what the Messiah would come to do.

So at least...

Part of what Mary would have heard from Gabriel is that she was going to have a son named Savior, and he is going to be the Messiah.

So out of all of that kind of complicated stuff that Gabriel communicates to Mary,

she would have at least heard that her son was to be named Savior and that he was going to be the Messiah, which is incredible news, right?

Incredible news.

And incredibly, she responds not with proud skepticism like Zachariah, going back and comparing her to the guy that we looked at last week, but with humble curiosity.

Look at verse 34.

And Mary said to the angel, how will this be since I am a virgin?



Now, there's a couple indicators here that this is a hopeful question, humble, hopeful curiosity, and not proud and dubious skepticism.

One, this hasn't happened before.

There's no major figure in Israel's history.

There's a minor passage that's a little confusing that is probably just talking about this event here.

Could be another event that took place in the Old Testament.

But no major figure in Israel's history that has conceived as a virgin.

This is new territory, more or less.

So Mary's justified in wondering how this is going to take place, right?

We've never seen this happen before.

How is this going to happen?

And notice, too, that she doesn't ask, how can I know, like Zachariah did.

Zachariah's like, okay, you know, how can I know, right?

Like, how can I be sure that what you said is going to happen?

Rather, she asks, how will this be?

Which indicates curiosity over skepticism.

And lastly, what we've seen of Mary so far and what we'll continue to see of Mary at the end of this scene, we've already seen her exercise humility in reflecting on what Gabriel has said and how he greeted her.

And we'll see at the end of the scene here how she humbly submits to God's miraculous work.

Neither of these things point to this being a proud, skeptical question.

Also, Gabriel honors the question with a direct response.

So he honors her with a direct response

as clear as he possibly can be when we're talking about, you know, divine, miraculous stuff, response.

And Gabriel, in responding, points to not only her conception, but Elizabeth's conception as well, to help her understand what's about to happen.

Look at verse 35.

And the angels answered her,

the son of God.

So perhaps the first thing we ought to address, just to get it out of the way here, is that the scholars of the Greek language all agree, there's no question here, that there are no sexual overtones to Gabriel's language.

Overshadow is a term that was used to describe

the Lord's presence filling the temple.

And come upon was fairly typical of people being filled with the Holy Spirit, none of which is referring to physical sexual acts.

This is primarily ceremonial language.

We can think almost temple, place where we worship God.

Muslims and cultists that read some sort of physical relationship between God and Mary into this message

reflect their own perversion, not the meaning and the thrust of the text here.

But Gabriel tells Mary that this pregnancy will be an act of God, right?

That God's going to move in her and he's going to cause her to conceive very similarly to the way that he moved in Elizabeth and caused her old barren womb to conceive and to bring about a child in verse 36.

You know, telling her about Elizabeth was gracious for a couple reasons.

One, Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy would have been noticeable by now.

She would have been six months pregnant, right?

So she would have had the bump going.

And it would confirm to Mary that what Mary had been told was true, that she wasn't like hallucinating or making this stuff up, right?

Like,

Elizabeth, miraculously conceived at an old age.

Therefore, I ought to be expecting what this angel has just told me to be true.

It also would help confirm to Joseph and possibly others around that Mary was telling the truth.

I mean, this is dangerous news for Mary.

Adultery, even during betrothal prior to marriage under Mosaic law,

was punishable at worst by death and at least by stigmatization and would have made it nearly impossible for her to continue to live in that community well, if at all.

And we find out in Matthew's gospel that the angel appeared to Joseph too to kind of instruct him, to warn him and instruct him on how to handle the situation or at least to not put Mary away and to accept her and his pregnancy.

But this connection to Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy would have helped too.

And as odd as it sounds, so we've looked at two miraculous conceptions so far at the beginning of Luke.

After his little greeting, he starts with these two visits by the angel and two miraculous conceptions.

As odd as it sounds, this experience of supernatural conception and change

and the change and the blessing and the danger that come with it, is probably our closest experiential connection to Mary and even to Elizabeth.

We're told in John 3, verses 3 to 8, that Jesus, in talking to Nicodemus, said, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes upon us and conceives in us new spiritual life and brings about the blessings and the privileges of being one of God's children.

But that also brings about great change in our life that's sometimes scary.

and sometimes threatens our relationships or how we interact with those at our job or in other areas of society.

I mean, Mary's experience is unique in that no one's ever given birth to the Son of God or conceived of the Son of God.

No one has held him in their hands the way that Mary did.

But we do share a common experience or the experience of God

filling us with the spirit, producing new spiritual life and us conceiving within us the new spiritual life that bring about blessing and that unsettled potential costly change that comes by the spirit.

We do share that and we do have that in common with her.

And as Gabriel's explanation and promise hung in the air, right, as he drops this bomb on Mary and he tells her, like, you're gonna conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit

All of this radical change is coming.

You're gonna have this intimate, close connection

to God, as that hangs in the air with those final words, for nothing is impossible with God, I've got to imagine, or at least if I was writing a movie script, I would definitely insert a long pause here, right, for dramatic tension.

Like, what's she going to say?

How is she going to respond?

Like, is she going to run away, turn tail and run away, or is she going to trust God and humbly submit

And she does, right?

She willingly and submissively responds to the hand and the work of the Lord.

She says, behold, I am the servant of the Lord in verse 38.

Let it be to me according to your word.

And the angel departed from her.

Mary responds exactly as we would expect of her up until this point, based on what we've already observed of her up until this point.

She responds in humility, knowing that she is the Lord's servant, not the other way around.

I mean, honestly, what I find most repulsive about name it and claim it culture

is that it treats God like a genie that works for us, right?

Who serves our every beck and whim and every little desire that we have.

Mary knew, right?

Mary knew that God loves to serve his people, that he loves to keep his promises to his people.

But she also knew that if I want my best and what I'm made for, I serve the Lord, right?

I do what he says.

He knows what's best for me.

I will follow him and serve him.

she responds with trust, right?

That the Lord is faithful and good to keep his word and to act on her best interest.

And she, I'm sure, responds in hope, right?

That God has seen her poverty, that he has seen her condition, and that he has chosen to bless her and that he has great plans for her.

And it's not just because she's, you know, one in several billion, right?

And that he's chosen her

to bear his son, but that he sees all, right, all of his children who are in poverty and in low estate and have great plans for them.

Mary beheld God's majesty and meekness in Gabriel's message.

She recognized it.

Zechariah didn't recognize it.

When it came, he didn't see it.

She does.

She sees God's glory and his majesty in meekness, and she responds by reflecting, believing, and submitting.

Perhaps you're seeing

and experiencing God's majesty today.

Perhaps his spirit's moving you to reflect, believe, and submit to him.

Will you respond with Mary?

Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we prayed earlier, would you give us eyes to see and ears to hear?

And Lord, would you soften our hearts to desire you above all else, to trust you more than we trust ourselves, to in all of our ways acknowledge you, knowing that you'll make our paths straight.

And Lord, would we humbly submit ourselves to your word, not just what we've heard from the Bible today, Lord, but humbly submit ourselves to the moving of your spirit

prompting us to know and follow you.

Pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.