

A Humble Servant and a Great God

Luke 1:26-56

This is our 3rd week into our study of Luke's gospel, and as for a short review, Luke, who is a physician, opens his gospel with his stated purpose for the writing, that someone named Theophilus would be certain about the events and teachings surrounding Jesus. So, Luke says he was very careful to put together an orderly account regarding the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the early beginnings of the church in the book of Acts.

Last week, Kevin walked us through 1:5-25, the story of Gabriel announcing to Zechariah, the priest, of John's coming birth. Again, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are old and without children, but God in his sovereign plan decides to use this older couple to bring about John the Baptist, who we will learn more about in coming weeks. But, Kevin reminded us that through this story we know that God cares for the world in a global, cosmic kind of way and he also cares for us individually in an intimate, personal way as well. We also saw how Zechariah's questioning of Gabriel's words were met with judgment as Luke continues to highlight this theme of faith and doubt.

THIS MORNING

We will see a similar story that continues some the same themes, but rather than centering around a priest in Israel, will center around a young, humble girl who is called to an amazing task, to give birth to none other than the Son of God himself. And we will see that, rather than respond in doubt, responds in praise.

We are going to bite off a pretty big chunk this morning, so I want us to walk through this story fairly quickly and then we will draw some big conclusions. There are two scenes here: SCENE 1 - MARY & GABRIEL; SCENE 2 - MARY & ELIZABETH

THE ANNUNCIATION - Luke 1:26-38

Luke 1:26-28

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

gin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

So again, here we see Gabriel, an angel sent by God, to deliver an important message to a young girl named Mary. We learn a couple of very important things about Mary here, 1) she is a virgin...she is a young girl, and 2) she is “betrothed.”

Betrothal in those times was kind of similar to what we might call engagement today, however the custom was the betrothal period lasted one year. The couple did not live together during this time, there was no intimacy between the two during their betrothal. And oftentimes the girls would be young, around 13 years old.

So, Mary, is betrothed to a guy named Joseph, “of the house of David,” which is an important detail in the story, which we will see in a moment, and Gabriel comes to her and says, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

“O favored one...”

Now, what does that mean, that Mary is “favored?” This is important to understand because this has been very misunderstood. The word “favored” comes from the Greek word for “grace.” Grace means undeserved favor or kindness. Gabriel is pronouncing that Mary is blessed by God, not because of her merit, but because of God’s grace towards her.

This is important to understand, Gabriel was not worshipping Mary, he was not venerating Mary, he wasn’t saying that Mary was full of grace. Understand that Mary is the *recipient* of grace. Mary is an *object* of grace and not a *source* of grace.

The Bible never says that Mary is the source of grace, as well as many other ideas that have been taught, like, Mary being sinless, that she remained a virgin her whole life, that she was assumed into heaven at the end of her life. What the Bible teaches is that Mary, by the undeserved grace of God, was chosen to be used in redemptive history.

Luke 1:29-33

29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** 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, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

So, Mary is “troubled,” like Zechariah, like any of us would be, and the angel explains to her the good news of his visit. That is, not only has she been graciously loved by God, but she will have a child, and not just any child. She will bear in her womb and give birth to Jesus, and he de-

scribes Jesus as “the Son of the Most High” and the one who will receive the throne of his father David, reigning over the house of Jacob forever.

Those descriptions might not mean a lot for us today at first hearing, but it would have meant a ton to Mary and those in her day. Because Gabriel has just said that Jesus would fulfill a promise God made many years before...

2 Samuel 7:12-13

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. **13** He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

God made a promise to David that one day he would raise up a child in David’s lineage who would have an everlasting kingdom. It was a promise that for generations, Israel would put their hope in, that a good king would reign over them without fear of tyranny or that his kingdom would fall.

Luke 1:34-38

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

35 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.

36 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. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38** And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Some similarities in this story...Mary responds with a question, Zechariah does too. There is a big difference here though. Mary is not judged for her question like Zechariah is. Why?

Her question is different. Zechariah asked, “How will I *know* this? In other words, he isn’t sure if he should believe. Mary’s question is “How will this be?” Mary believed but she didn’t understand how it would work.

The answer of Gabriel is an incredible, supernatural mystery...she would be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit and she would conceive Jesus.

But this is a great picture we shouldn’t miss. That word “overshadow” is used elsewhere in Scripture, specifically at the end of Exodus.

The last chapter of Exodus ends with the description of the tabernacle, that the cloud meant to show God’s presence settled on the tabernacle, or overshadowed it. At that time in Israel’s histo-

ry God met with his people there in the tabernacle and later in the temple. But now God's presence would be known in a new way. As the Spirit settled on or "overshadowed" Mary, the God-man, Jesus would be conceived and eventually born. This is what is meant when John writes in his gospel in John 1:14...

John 1:14a

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

"dwelt" there could be understood as literally, to dwell in a tent or that Jesus "tabernacled" among us.

So, Gabriel comes to Mary and says the One who all of Israel has been waiting for is coming and he's going to come through you. God's presence would be known in a new way. And Mary's reply is amazing, she says, "let it be according to your word." If that is how you want to use me, I'm in. No excuses here, no negotiations, I want to be used and am willing.

THE VISITATION AND MAGNIFICAT - Luke 1:39-56

Luke 1:39-45

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! **43** And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

John responds with immense joy, like all those who trust in Christ do.

We will talk more about the person of John the Baptist in coming passages in Luke, but John's purpose in history was to be a forerunner to Jesus. He was to be this prophet that would "prepare the way" of the Lord. He is really a very important figure in the biblical story because John gets to say both, "The King is coming," AND "The King is here." And in this scene we see John's first act in fulfilling his ministry to testifying of Jesus as he leaps in the womb of Elizabeth.

One commentator wrote, "John the Baptist is the first child ever to use a womb for a pulpit."

Look again at Elizabeth's words in v. 45 - Elizabeth compliments Mary's faith. Now, imagine if Zechariah was in the room or nearby when she said that. They have been married for many years...we have to admire Elizabeth's skill here when she, with one sentence, compliments Mary and at the same time potentially throws shade at her husband. And Zechariah really can't com-

plain because 1) he physically can't, he's mute. And 2) she is right, Zechariah didn't show the faith that Mary did.

Now, notice Mary's response. Rather than saying, you're right I'm pretty blessed, I must be a big deal, from now on rather than Mary, just call me "The Favored One," RATHER Mary responds in praise for God.

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

Again, this is traditionally called The Magnificat - first word in Latin, Magnificat = "magnifies"...enlarge the view of God

There, of course, is much that could be said by this hymn of praise but the two themes of Mary's song is that 1) God exalts the humble, and 2) God humbles the proud.

A FEW APPLICATIONS

1. God sees and cares for the lowly in the world.

Mary was hardly a celebrity in her day. She was a teenager, poor, probably uneducated, and from Nazareth (which was hardly a happening place). Nazareth is the town of which it was later asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Mary, I'm sure, was overlooked a lot in her life. It's easy to feel overlooked, isn't it?

-illus. I'm easily overlooked...restaurant in Florence...

You might feel overlooked by everyone at work. You might feel overlooked by everyone at school. You might even feel overlooked by your own family. But you should never feel overlooked by God. God sees you. God knows you. God knows your struggles. God knows your desires. God knows the difficult circumstances you are facing this morning. You are not lost in the crowd this morning.

2. God often uses the lowly for his purposes.

One of the amazing things about Gabriel's greeting is not only did he call Mary "favored," but he said to her that "Lord is with you." The reason that is amazing is that phrase is oftentimes what we read in a greeting to some of the great men of the Old Testament. And now, here is lowly, humble Mary greeted in the same way. Just like Joshua, Gideon, David, and Jeremiah, and now teenage Mary of Nazareth.

Mary is not an "influencer." Mary is not a "cultural architect." She does not have a "platform." Yet God chooses her to be the conduit through which God would enter the world.

You might feel that you have nothing to offer God that he might need. You are right. God does not need your service. God does not need your talents. God does not need your abilities. God does not need your influence. However, God loves to use those who are wholly dependent on him and not themselves for his work.

3. Humble service is the path to greatness in the kingdom.

There are many similarities in this story and the previous one we looked at last week, however there is a big difference between Elizabeth and Mary here. For Elizabeth, she had been barren her entire life and endured shame and reproach from a culture that wrongly believed there was something wrong with her. So for her, this pregnancy would, as she said in verse 25, would take away her "reproach." But for Mary, this pregnancy would only bring reproach on her.

Gabriel is telling her she is going to be an unwed teen mom. She had to endure the staining of her reputation in town. Imagine the gossip, people wondering who the father was. She would obviously have to endure the pains of pregnancy and childbirth but then consider the pain she would have to endure throughout the life of Jesus. Mary would have to watch her Savior, but also her son, be arrested, crucified, and buried. And yet when tasked with this assignment, she, in humility, says, "let your will be done in my life." When she says that, she is consenting to a lifetime of suffering.

This is what we are called to as Christians. We are all called to respond to God with whatever He puts before us with humility saying, I am your servant, let your will be done.

This is the way of Christians because this is the way of Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of humble service. Paul said of Jesus in Philippians 2...

Philippians 2:5-11

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **9** Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Again, Jesus, deserving of all glory, laid it aside to be born of a young, peasant girl, to live among us and be rejected, laying down his life for us at the cross. He would offer himself to pay the penalty of sins, but not the penalty of his sins, but ours. He humbly served and serves. He is the One who said that he has come not to be served but to serve. And if this is the way of life for the King, this is the way of life for those in his kingdom. Understand, climbing the ladder in the kingdom of God looks very different than climbing the ladder in the kingdom of this world. We climb down. Because Jesus says that greatness in the kingdom is not defined by status but by serving.

Humble service is the path to greatness in the kingdom of God and it was perfectly demonstrated to us by Christ. Are you walking in humble service? Humble yourself and let God exalt you, rather than exalting yourself and forcing God to humble you.

4. The person of God and the work of God demands our praise.

This was Mary's response to all of this wasn't it? She doesn't boast in herself but in God. She doesn't boast in her role in the work of God, but merely in God's work. Don't get distracted here, don't be confused about who the hero of this story is. The hero is not Mary. We admire Mary. We admire her faith and humility certainly, but the real hero is not the mother of Jesus but Jesus Himself.

Like Mary, like Zechariah, like the others we should respond in praise this morning to the coming of our Savior, but all the more. Because we not only are responding to the birth of Christ, today we respond in praise to his crucifixion and resurrection. This morning we gather as the people of God, desiring to "magnify" Him in our lives and in this city, because He has not forgotten us. He has not left us to our own ruin but has been working a divine plan to redeem us, and that would come through the virgin birth of Jesus, who would grow and live a sinless life, lay down his life as in a sacrificial death, and then victoriously rise again to life showing victory over sin, Satan, and death. And we, his humble servants, respond with praise.

VERSES

Luke 1:26-28
Luke 1:29-33
2 Samuel 7:12-13
Luke 1:34-38
John 1:14
Luke 1:39-45
Luke 1:46-55
Philippians 2:5-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt overlooked by God? What helped your faith in those times?
2. Why do you think God uses people who aren't all-stars for his purposes?
3. Why is humble service so hard for us sometimes?
4. How does the gospel help us serve with humility?
5. What would it look like for your life to "magnify" the Lord?