

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 December 2023

Luke 1:26-38

The passage for today states, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth: to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary." You may ask, "Six months after what?" I believe Luke wants us to read this passage of the announcement to Mary in light of the announcement to the old priest Zechariah, the passage that comes immediately before.

The expression "In the sixth month" means Six months after the announcement to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth was to have a son.

Another sign that these are parallel stories comes from the fact that the angel Gabriel appears to both. Same Angel, two stories, one whole narrative.

We also see how the two babies to be born are connected not just by family ties, but also by prophesy. The fact that Jesus' human father is a descendant of David, makes Jesus the "shoot from the stock of Jesse, the branch that grows out of his roots." (Isaiah 11:1). Isaiah tells us that, "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." Last week we heard both Isaiah and Michah announce the coming of one who prepares the way for the Lord. According to the Angel, this is John's role.

The Angel salutes Mary, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words."

The Angel Gabriel adds an important detail in his salute to Mary that we don't see in his salute to Zechariah: He says that Mary is favored. Favor in this context is very different than how we see God's favor. She will be an unwed mother in a patriarchal society, her son will one day be crucified like a common criminal, and a sword will pierce her heart. But this salute is itself part of the scandalous nature of God's incarnation story.

The angel says to both, "Do not be afraid." Then he announces that God is about to do something special in both women's lives. The angel tells Zechariah, "Elizabeth will bear a son." To Mary, "You will conceive and give birth to a son." Then the angel names both children. "You will name him John." And "You will name him Jesus."

The giving of names indicates God's election of the person. We have seen this throughout Scripture: Abram is given the name Abraham, Sarai is called Sarah, Jacob is called Israel, etc. When God names you, God gives you a new identity followed by a new vocation. In fact, this is what the angel does next. He describes the children's vocation to their parents.

He says to Mary, "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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

To the old priest he says, "he (John) will be great in the sight of the Lord... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This is the vocation of both children: John is to prepare the way for Jesus and Jesus is to inherit the kingdom of his ancestor David and to rule for eternity. He is to be the awaited Messiah.

The passage continues, "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you... therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'"

Zechariah says, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." In other words, "My wife has been barren all her life and she is an old woman. How will this happen?" The angel says, "I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." In other words, "God will take care of this!" To Mary, the Angel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you."

Zechariah doubted, but the Angel preempts any doubts from Mary, "Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is her sixth month..." If Elizabeth is pregnant, then nothing is impossible with God. She says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

When it comes to the annunciation to Mary and the incarnation of Jesus, many have been so concerned about the "How" that they often ignore the "What." They become obsessed with the idea of virginity, the "How will this happen?" and miss the scandal of what's happening here. God himself is breaking into the human stage, taking on flesh and blood. God chooses the imperfections of humanity: hunger, pain, suffering, exhaustion, discouragement, fear, etc. God chooses to experience human emotions of joy, sadness, exultation, affection, love. God chooses to replicate the pattern of creation. No male participation and very little, if

any, human action at the moment of conception. This is what happened in creation. We are told that the Spirit of God brought something out of nothing. God's creative word, "Let it be" does all the work.

Part of the scandal of this incarnation is also the choice of a simple young girl and not a royal prince or a wealthy lady of status and class. God chooses the most simple of people to be the mother of the Savior, even after five hundred years of glorious announcements by the prophets about the Son of David. And this announcement is made in a most unsophisticated town, and not in a large metropolitan city like Rome, Corinth, Antioch, or Alexandria. Nowhere but in a backwater fishing village in Galilee. And perhaps the greatest cause for scandal is the political implications of the announcement. In the midst of a mighty empire, where the emperor calls himself the "son of God," and where most people believe in his divinity, the Angel says that this child will be "Called the Son of the Most High." Jesus will truly be the very image of God. Finally, in an empire where the emperors rule with great might, "God will give to the child the throne of his ancestor David," and his reign will have no end. It will be an eternal reign.

This type of political language would have been enough for Mary to be terrified, to ask additional clarifications, to perhaps launch a complaint against God's decision. But Mary simply says, "Let what you say become a reality." I have said before that this "Let it be" is the most powerful "Yes" the world has ever seen from a human. This decision changes the world forever. And the most remarkable thing is that Mary accepts the Angel's words not because she had all the information, not because she knew exactly how this would work out, and not because she was without fear of a society that punishes unwed mothers severely. She accepts in faith. She trusts God to do as the Angel has said. God would be in control. God was starting a new creation and the world would never be the same.

Salvation history has advanced from creation to new creation through God's choice of simple men and women and through the faith of those people God chooses. I pray that we may have Mary's faith today. God's new creation is at work in us. God is doing a new thing in us this very day. Through our baptism in his Son, God has given us a new identity: We are followers. He has also given us a vocation: We are to make disciples of all nations, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. I pray that we may see God's creation in our lives and that we may live lives that honor God's choice of us and his call for our lives. Amen!