

ADVENT 2019

“The Annunciation”

Luke 1:26-38

Sunday, December 8, 2019 (The Second Sunday of Advent)

By David A. Ritchie

“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 greeting 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 the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:26–38, ESV).

Heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you for the gift of the Holy Scriptures, which you have caused to be written for our sake. As we read them, study them, and inwardly digest them, may your Spirit come upon us and overshadow us. We ask that you bring forth hope and everlasting life in our hearts, that then we may bear forth the light of Christ to the world. We pray this in the name of Your Son and our Savior. Amen.

I. Introduction

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is holy season of anticipation and expectation, wherein Christians have historically looked back in time to remember the longing of ancient Israel for the arrival of the Messiah and God’s Kingdom. And even so, as those who have believed that this Messiah has come in the person of Jesus Christ, we too posture our hearts toward the hope of his promised return.

In many ways, this season displays the unique identity and place in history of the Church. *We are an inter-advent people; we live between the two advents of Christ.* The season of Advent is meant to stir our hearts from the hurry and haste of everyday life that we can be reminded of this eternal reality.

Visually, the nature of Advent is reflected by the two paintings that hang in our sanctuary. Both of these paintings were created during the Advent season. While they are based off of historic pieces of Christian art, these particular pieces were designed as paint by number outlines by an Amarillo artist

named Jacob Rogers. Then, the people of Redeemer were able to actively participate in these paintings by filling in the gaps with paint. They were hung in our sanctuary this year to emphasize Advent identity of the church. The first painting of on the south wall refers to the first coming of Christ (the very text we read this morning, in which the angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will bear the Messiah). The second painting on the north wall refers to Revelation chapter 10, in which an angel with legs as pillars of fire imparts a prophetic vision to the Apostle John that will become the final book of Revelation, which deals with the return of Christ. So here we have reminders of the first advent of Christ and the second advent of Christ. And in between these two advents, we have the worshipping Church.

But this morning, because of the text we are studying, I wanted to call your attention to the first painting, which is inspired by a fresco called “*The Annunciation*,” which was painted by the renaissance artist Fra Angelico in the 1450’s. As I mentioned earlier, this painting is intended to capture the powerful moment that Gabriel gives Mary the news that she will become the mother of God.

Here is the original painting [*show the image of “The Annunciation” by Fra Angelico*] that is located at a monastery named San Marco in Florence, Italy. As any piece of art, I have heard good things, and I have heard critical things about this painting. In fact, one of the first comments I heard about this painting was after we create our own imitation of it was, “why is there a picketed fence in the background? I’m pretty sure they didn’t have those back in the first century.” And that is true. But it is also true that Fra Angelico intentionally painted this piece to have many features that would never have appeared in first-century Palestine. Sure, there is the picketed fence, but there is also a colonnaded porch that looks much more like the San Marco monastery in Florence than anything in Israel. And there is one more thing that appears in this painting that you would have never seen in first-century Palestine – *white people*.

But again, this is not an accident; it is design. The artist is saying that while it is easy to mythologize the story that we read in today’s Scripture reading, it was very much a real event that happened to a real person like you and men. *Fra Angelico is inviting us to imagine what it would be like for the supernatural to suddenly break into your natural, everyday life.*

This theme of the world of heaven breaking in among us is not just a theme of Fra Angelico; it is also the theme of these first few chapters of the Gospel According to Luke. As we learned last week, Luke is like an investigative journalist who is exploring the life of Jesus through the perspective of real eyewitnesses, real people who personally observed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And the amazing thing about the story of today’s text is that it could have only come from one person – Mary herself.¹

II. The Text

So as we look deeper into this story, wherein Mary receives life-changing news, I would like to explore three big ideas of this text: *1.) The Grace of God, 2.) The Coming of a Savior, and 3.) The Beauty of Faith.*

1.) The Grace of God.

We are cued by verse 26 to understand that this story is connected to the one that preceded it. It is the sixth month of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy. And God has sent an angel, which is a heavenly

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 63.

messenger, the town of Nazareth in Galilee. Now, Nazareth of Galilee was about as significant as Nazareth of the Texas panhandle.

Mary is insignificant too. At this point in her life, she is probably thirteen to fifteen years old. Yet, Mary is addressed as one of the great men of the OT: **“And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’”** (Luke 1:28, ESV).

Mary’s astonishment comes from this greeting, which addressed her in such exalted terms, and implied that, like the great men of OT times, she was chosen to serve God and to be empowered by him.² Mary has done nothing to deserve or merit this honor. Mary is chosen by grace and grace alone. And if we dig into the Greek language of this passage, it is very clear that grace is a theme that Luke wants us to understand is at play. In fact, the root word for grace (χάρις) is used three times in course of three verses. *She is greeted with grace, identified as one on whom grace resides, and one who has found the grace of God.*³

It is grace that gives Christianity its uniqueness of among the world religion. In other religions, we are given good advice about how we can get to God, but Christianity is good news about how God has come to us. Other world-views may encourage you to try harder to become a better person, but the faith in Christ will cause you to become a new person.

Grace is an act of God that is nothing less than a miracle.

And here, Luke is giving us a visual picture of what grace looks like and why it matters. As the late Fred B. Craddock writes on Luke 1: **“Elizabeth and Mary will have sons because God is able; they will have sons for our sake because God is gracious.”**⁴ In other words, ***God does not save us because we are good. God saves us because he is good.***

If you were to stop for a moment, where can you see the evidences of God’s grace in your life? How can these reminders of God’s presence and grace move you to worship in this Advent season?

2.) The Coming of a Savior.

At the very end of the Luke’s gospel, the resurrected Christ encounters two of his disciples on the road from Jerusalem to a small town called Emmaus (Lk. 24). They do not recognize him in his resurrected body, but these men begin to tell Jesus of his own death and the early reports of his resurrection. Then, Jesus begins to speak and tell them that all that has happened in his life, death, and resurrection was already in the Old Testament.

Remember, the first verse of this book tells us that Luke is writing this gospel to compile narrative about what Jesus has “accomplished” and fulfilled (Lk. 1:1). The Old Testament has built the categories to help us comprehend the reality of Jesus. And here, in verses 31 through 33, Gabriel will now giving us a shot-gun blast of Old Testament concepts to convey “who” Jesus is.⁵ He will be (i) a savior, (ii) will be great, (iii) he will be the Son of the Most High, (iv) he will have the throne of David, (v) he will reign over Israel, and (vi) he will reign eternally.

² Ibid., 66.

³ “χάριτός is ‘to bestow favour upon’, ‘to bless’ (Eph. 1:6**); cf. Sir. 18:17). The participle indicates that Mary has been especially favoured by God in that he has already chosen her to be the mother of the ‘Messiah.’” Ibid., 65.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 27.

⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 83.

Jesus is the Aramaic name for Joshua, which means “God Saves.” This shows us not only that Jesus will be a savior. Jesus is also the new Joshua. He is the one who will lead God’s people into a true and better Promise Land.⁶

He will also be a great one. He will be the promised descendant the Old Testament hero King David, who will re-establish the kingdom of David (cf. 2 Sam 7). More than being just a king, he will be an everlasting king who will usher in a new era.

Mary’s child will be the personal embodiment of all the hopes of the Old Testament.

“How will this be?” Mary asks naturally. Gabriel then says Christ’s birth will come through the miracle of the virgin birth. Can we, as a modern, scientific people believe such a thing?

Yes, the doctrine of the virgin birth is outside the realm of what we modern people would imagine to be scientifically possible. But it is an utter act of “chronological snobbery” to assume that this is something that separates us from the people of the ancient world. Believe it or not, people in the first century were very aware of where babies came from.⁷ The conception of Jesus was just as unlikely, just as impossible, and just as miraculous for the people of the first century as it would be for people of the twenty-first century.

But as we drill deeper into this idea, there is a rich biblical symbolism at work in these verses describing the miraculous conception of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will “comes upon” and “overshadow” Mary (Lk. 1:35). Theologian I. Howard Marshall notices that the word used here for “overshadow” is related to the same language the Old Testament uses of the presence of the Lord filling the tabernacle in Exodus 40.⁸

Thus, the same presence of God that filled the Tabernacle of Moses (Ex. 40) now will fill the womb of Mary. The God of the Old Testament has now chosen to take on flesh and fold himself within a human embryo.

This is the marvel of the doctrine of incarnation; God becoming man. Heaven has broken into earth.⁹

For this reason, Gabriel says, Jesus will be called “the Son of God.” By this miracle of the Virgin birth, Jesus is both God and man. And we needed a Messiah who is completely God and completely man. Why? **Only a man could endure the penalty of sin; only God could defeat its power; thus, only one who is both could be our Messiah.**

3.) The Beauty of Faith.

⁶ “The name Ἰησοῦς corresponds to Hebrew $y\text{e}^{\text{e}}\square\text{os}^{\text{v}}\text{ua}^{\text{c}}$ or $y\text{e}\text{s}^{\text{v}}\text{u}\text{a}^{\text{c}}$, and was a common Jewish name up to the beginning of the second century AD; thereafter both Jews and Christians ceased to call their children by it. Its meaning, ‘Yahweh saves’, was seen to be deeply significant (Mt. 1:21), and although Luke does not expressly draw attention to it, it is hard to believe that he was not aware of it.” Marshall, 67.

⁷ N.T. Wright. *Luke for Everyone*. (Louisville: WJK, 2001, 2004), 9.

⁸ “ἐπισκιάζω is ‘to cover’ (9:34 par. Mk. 9:7; par. Mt. 17:5) or ‘to overshadow’ (Acts 5:15**). It is used of God’s presence resting on the tabernacle in the cloud (Ex. 40:35 (29)) and metaphorically protecting his people (Pss. 91:4 (90:4); 140:7 (139:8)).” Marshall, 70.

⁹ Michael Wilcock, *The Savior of the World: The Message of Luke’s Gospel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 39.

Luke means for the accounts of John's birth and Jesus birth to be understood as parallel accounts so that we can see that John is great, but Jesus is greater.¹⁰ And also, Mary's belief is contrasted with Zechariah's unbelief.

As an over-reaction to Roman Catholicism, Protestants often fail to appreciate the beauty of Mary's faith. She is truly one of the most remarkable examples of faith in the entire Bible.

We tend to think of faith as knowing true doctrine. But faith is more than that. As I have preached before, the highest form of faith is not just knowing what God has said and believing what God has said, but *trusting* what God has said.

Mary yields to the divine. She believes, and her belief brings forth obedience. And her obedience will be costly (both immediately and long-term).

She was engaged, and in Jewish culture at this time to be engaged was a serious and legally binding promise. To break off an engagement required a divorce. And to become pregnant with another man's child was an act of adultery. Not only was Mary subject to public scorn and shame, but even punishment.

As New Testament scholar Robert H. Stein writes: "*Marriage consisted of two distinct stages: engagement followed by the marriage itself...An engagement was legally binding, and any sexual contact by the daughter with another person was considered adultery. The engagement could not be broken save through divorce (Matt 1:19), and the parties during this period were considered husband and wife (Matt 1:19–20, 24). At this time Mary likely was no more than fifteen years old, probably closer to thirteen, which was the normal age for betrothal.*"¹¹

More than just risking shame at this point in her life, in becoming the mother of God, she will have to endure watching Jesus serve people, love people, heal people, only to be crucified on a sinner's cross. As moved as we might ever be by the crucifixion of Christ, Mary experienced this moment in a way no one else in history will ever be able to comprehend.

Like the powerful lion Aslan in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, this passage shows us a God who is untamable and at times, very unsafe. Yet he is good. In fact, he is the very fountain of all that good. And for that reason, Mary trusts him.

The Bible tells us elsewhere, that if you are a Christian, you too have been saved by grace through faith for good works (cf. Eph 2:8-10).

In this way, Mary images our calling, too; *the call of the Church in bearing Christ to the world.*

This is our role Redeemer Christian Church. So in this season, let us marvel at the profound grace of God and the glory of the Savior who has been given. And let us consider: How might God be asking you to yield to his will? What will it cost you to bear Christ to the world? Let's pray.

¹⁰ "Whereas John's birth was miraculous and had OT parallels, Jesus' birth was even more miraculous. John's conception, like that of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, was miraculous; but Jesus' conception was absolutely unique. It was not just quantitatively greater; it was qualitatively different." Stein, 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 82.

Discussion Starters for GCs:

- 1) *In Luke 1:28, the angel Gabriel addresses the teenager Mary with the same honor of one the heroes of the Old Testament. Mary has done nothing to merit this honor, but rather God has favored her by grace. What are some tangible ways you have experienced the extraordinary grace of God in your life? How should these examples of God's grace motivate your heart?*
- 2) *The verses of Luke 1:31-35 are loaded with theological information about who Mary's child will be. What truths can we learn about Jesus from these few verses?*
- 3) *For Mary to yield to the will of the Lord was a humble and costly act. How might the Lord be calling you to follow him in ways that are costly?*