

“How Can This Be?”

Luke 1:26-38

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

Actually, this is the sermon I was going to preach last week. I’ve been snowed-in for about ten days, so I’ve had a lot of time to think about it; too much, actually. You can’t understand the passage I just read to you unless you understand the context that you find it in. The context is really the verses that came just previous to that passage. Today’s passage is about the angel, Gabriel, coming to bring this message, these tidings, to this girl, Mary. Yet, this message from Gabriel comes after he’s just delivered another message. The message that we saw before was given to a man named Zacharias. Zacharias was a high priest in Israel, in Jerusalem, and he had a wife named Elizabeth, who was barren. Gabriel came to the high priest while he was in worship and said to him, “You are going to have a son in your old age.” He said, “How? How can I know this? My wife is barren and I’m an old man.” Because of his doubt (he asked that question that was rooted in doubt) the angel said, “I’m going to strike you mute. You’re going to be dumb. You’re not going to speak until the child is born. His name will be John. He will be the forerunner to the Great One, the Messiah who would come.”

In the Ancient Near East, frankly, it was usually better to be a man than a woman because they had more privileges. You had a man who was a high priest in Jerusalem in the middle of the temple. You didn’t get more religious or more inside than Zacharias was. So here you have Zacharias, the ultimate insider, who is given a message from an angel, and he immediately doubts it. His wife, Elizabeth, being barren—it would have been a complete disgrace to her. It would have been something that would have been on her mind all the time because it was horrible. So the message that Gabriel brought to Zacharias and Elizabeth was not that you are going to be disgraced or things are going to be hard, but in fact, your honor is going to be restored and your disgrace is going to be removed from you. Now that’s completely different than the message that he’s going to give to Mary. It’s very much the same, but it’s also completely different because on one hand you have the ultimate religious insider, a man who’s a priest in Jerusalem, and then when you begin to look at Mary you have the ultimate religious outsider.

Remember how I was telling you that God always initiates with the worst of sinners? In Mary’s case she’s not necessarily the worst of sinners, but she’s certainly one of the most unlikely. When God chooses Mary to bear the baby Jesus, basically what he has done is he is setting up Mary to be involved in the biggest scandal in history, a scandal of incredible proportions. Most of us when we think about Christmas or we think about Christianity, we think of Christmas as this sort-of sentimental, joyful time where we see pictures of the manger, the nativity scenes and the glow over the stable, all of these kinds of things. It’s sort of joyful and happy. Then at the end of the Gospels you see Jesus dying and it’s a scandal because an innocent man is betrayed and crucified, and it’s scandalous. But when you really look at what happened at Christmas, Christmas is just as big a scandal as what happened on Good Friday and Easter. In fact, the life of Jesus began and ended in scandal. Now, the glory of that is because the life of Jesus began and ended in scandal, those who are scandalous can become honorable. Those who are scandalous can have their disgrace removed from them.

We’re going to look at two things. I’m going to give you members, those attending the second service a gift this morning. The first service I had three points, for you I only have two. Two that are each half longer than the ones I did in the first service. The two points are just this: The first point is going to be the scandal of grace. The second point is going to be the song of the Gospel. What’s the scandal of grace? Let me read to you the first few verses.

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 virgin's name was Mary. (ESV)

Basically what Luke opens with are Mary’s credentials. Remember Luke is a doctor and Luke’s Gospel is the most detailed, and Luke sort-of prided himself (in a good sense) on being theologically and historically accurate. But also remember that

Luke in this account mentions three times that Mary is a virgin. Even for a doctor in the Ancient Near East, to talk about something like virgin birth, he would have been ostracized, he would have been crazy. So when Luke emphasizes that this birth was a virgin birth it must mean something. But the first thing he opens with is Mary's credentials, and notice Mary's credentials for being the mother of Jesus. It says,

²⁶ *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth (ESV)*

That's significant. Why? In other places in the Bible, Galilee is called Galilee of what? Galilee of the Gentiles. You see Herod was in charge of Israel at that time, and Israel was divided up into about six different regions depending on how you slice it. You have Judea, and Samaria and Idumea and these places. One of those regions was Nazareth, and Nazareth was the place where you herded the Gentiles. So if you were in Israel and a Gentile, Nazareth is where you were encouraged to live. It would have been the "other side of the tracks." If you were a Jew living in Nazareth, you would not necessarily been considered unclean, but you would have been considered unwise or unworthy. "Yeah, you were Jewish, but if you really wanted to be Jewish and a good Jew you would live in Jerusalem or any place else but Nazareth." Remember in the book of John where they say, "We found Jesus of Nazareth" and the first thing that Andrew says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That's a proverb. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? That's how bad it is. So here you have Mary who is from the "other side of the tracks," the worst part of town, and what would have been considered unclean territory. Then it says she was a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph.

Now I'm sure I've talked about this before for the past few years, but most of us in modern days, we can't understand what betrothal is. Betrothal basically was marriage for them. Betrothal started in Israel the minimum age you could be betrothed would be twelve years old. Typically you were twelve-and-a-half when you were betrothed, and the earlier you could push betrothal back, the younger your daughter was, the more favorable it was because that way the father could ensure her purity. So most girls were betrothed at the age of twelve-and-a-half or thirteen. So Mary, if she's a typical girl, she's probably twelve-and-a-half or thirteen years old.

Now keep in your mind Zacharias, the other guy, and the message that came before. You have a man in the middle of the temple that basically is a religious insider, and now we have a thirteen-year-old girl who is from the worst part of town and she's betrothed to a man named Joseph. Betrothal basically meant this. It meant that they would come together and they'd have a bride price and the man would negotiate, or his family would negotiate a dowry and then at the moment of betrothal they would shake on it and you would be considered married. At that point if you wanted to break it off you had to get a divorce. It was that binding. The bride would then live with her family for a year and at the end of a year she would go into her groom's house when the marriage was consummated physically, then they would be considered completely, one hundred percent married. So you have the time between betrothal and the time they actually move in together is this time that they're supposed to be pure. So you have this girl, Mary, who is supposed to be pure for the next year. She's betrothed to Joseph and an angel comes to her.

Did you notice what Gabriel does to her is so obvious it's easy to miss. Gabriel pulls an Oreo on Mary. What I call the "Oreo Principal." If you've ever been in business or if you've been in counseling (which I've been in both), they talk about when you have to say something hard to somebody you make an Oreo out of it. In other words you sandwich the hard thing between two good things so you say something good and then you say the hard thing and then you say something good and everything's supposed to be copasetic after that. Right? That's how I take bad news. But, the angel comes, and let me read that to you so you understand what I'm saying. He goes to the virgin Mary,

²⁸ *And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"* ²⁹ *But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (ESV)*

Did you notice what troubled her? If it was I, I might be troubled by the fact that an angel just showed up. That's not what troubled her. It says the angel showed up and he greeted her "Greetings, O favored one, God is with you." It says, "Mary was troubled at his saying. Wondering what kind of greeting this might be." Why would Mary be troubled by someone coming to her and saying, "Greetings O favored one, God is with you!"? Basically there are two reasons as I was thinking about it. You have a practical reason and a theological reason. The practical reason is just this, if Mary is sharp which I think she is. For example, the other night Judy and I were getting ready for bed and we were laying there and I uncharacteristically was complaining about something and Judy said, "Tommy, you know I love you, right?" As soon as she said, "You know I love you, right?" I started to laugh. She asked, "What are you doing?" I said, "That is what Gabriel did to Mary!" He's getting ready to deliver this news that has to be mind blowing, and he says, "Hey, Mary you know I love you, right?" And Mary, if she's sharp is going, "You know people don't start out like that. People don't just come to you with good news. Hey you know, everything's all right, you know." He says, "Greetings, O favored one." And Mary is

disturbed by that. Then he comes back again and says, “Do not be afraid. You have the favor of God. The Lord is with you.”

What’s the theological rationale for her being perplexed? The answer, I think, is grace. Grace has perplexed her. If you think about it, here she is a thirteen-year-old girl from the other side of the tracks. She’s a nobody. She’s lowly, she’s completely on the outside of the religious establishment and God comes and says, “You have my favor.” The most perplexing thing about the Gospel is that sinners, not just Mary, but people like you and me would find God’s favor. That he would come and say, “Greetings favored one.” If grace doesn’t unsettle you, you don’t understand it. If you really understood your sin and you understood the magnitude of your separation from God and how little you bring to the table, and when you understand that God finds favor with you because of nothing you’ve done but because he’s simply chosen to show it, that’s unsettling. In fact, he says, “Mary, don’t be afraid. The favor of the Lord is upon you.”

There’s another reason, now that I think about it, why he opens this way. Why does he open by saying, “Mary, you are favored of God.”? It’s because he’s getting ready to tell Mary news that at very least is going to make her life difficult. Realistically, it’s going to make her an outcast. Realistically, it’s going to make her life horrible. Realistically, it’s going to turn her life and put her right in the center of a huge scandal in her town. So why does he open and say, “Greetings, O favored one!” The answer I think is to simply tell her, “Mary, what I’m getting ready to tell you is not the result of God’s displeasure, but it’s the result of God’s favor.” In other words, “Get ready to go through some incredibly difficult times and some incredibly difficult situations and all of these things are not because God is displeased with you, but in fact they are because God has shown his favor to you. When you begin to look at it in that perspective it should change the way you look at all the other things in your life. You can bet over the past ten days as I’ve been snowed into my house, I’ve preached to myself, “Tommy, the reason for this is God’s favor. He’s not mad at you, it’s because He loves you. There’s some reason He wants you stuck here.” That sounds funny, but it’s true. That’s funny, but it’s not when you have cancer is it? It’s not when you lose a loved one, is it? It’s not when you lose your job or you’re called to do something hard. It’s much harder then, isn’t it to say, “You know all these things that are happening to me is not because God is displeased with me, it’s because He is pleased with me. There is something He’s wanting to do in my life that is going to be so big and grand that I need to go through this hard thing in order to get to. Mary was perplexed at that. And grace is perplexing because it is scandalous, because what the Gospel says is that the very most righteous, holy person who ever lived, God himself, was born into humble circumstances, lived the life you should have lived, died the death you should have died, and then was crucified on your behalf. That is a scandal, and frankly it’s unfair. Which is why it’s a scandal, and yet that is what the Gospel says. The question is, “Do you believe that?” Because if you believe it then you can begin to hear the song of the Gospel, what the angel tells to Mary next. Let’s read that.

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.” (ESV)

That was the bomb dropped right there. “You’re going to conceive in your womb and bear a son.” That’s the scary news. If there’s anything a bride hates is when her wedding plans are crashed, especially by something like that. “You’re going to bear a son, but now here’s the good news, his name will be Jesus.” Lots of people were named Jesus in the Ancient Near East. The name Jesus meant “Yahweh saves.” But the angel says to her, “Here’s the good news for you. You’re going to conceive and bear this son.” (scary news). “Here’s the good news. His name is going to be Jesus. Like lots of these guys are named Jesus, but this kid, his name is Jesus because he will actually do that his name says.” That’s what the angel told Joseph, “You name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” To Mary, that is great news. “You are going to bear the one who will save his people and all the world from their sins, and not only that but he will take the throne of his father David.”

We looked at I Samuel over the course of the fall, and the whole point of the book of I Samuel is that Israel needs a king, and not just any king but a king like David, David’s great Son, the One from his line and the One who will reign forever. So the angel comes to this nobody, this outsider, on the wrong side of the tracks, in the worst part of town, and says, “You’re going to bear the one who is that One. Your son is going to be David’s Son Who will sit on the throne forever. The One that we’ve dreamed about forever is going to come from you.”

You’ve got to love Mary. Protestants don’t give her enough credit, I think, because Mary asks a question. Remember Zacharias asked a question and he was rebuked for it. He was made mute for a year. Mary asks a question and she’s praised for it. She’s encouraged. What’s the difference between Zacharias’ question, “How can I know?” and Mary’s question, “How can this be?” The answer is pretty simple. When Zacharias asks a question about Elizabeth becoming pregnant, he’s asking a question that’s rooted in doubt. When Mary asks a question, “How can this be because I’m a virgin?” She’s asking a question that’s rooted in mechanics and biology. “How am I going to have this kid if I’ve not yet known a man, if I’m a

virgin?" You see that's not a question of doubt, that's just a question of mechanics. That's curiosity, and who wouldn't ask that question. The angel responds again,

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."* (ESV)

When she asks a question, he says, "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you and this child will be called the Son of God." In other words, Jesus won't have a human father who will transfer his sin nature to him, in fact he will be pure and holy as God is holy. In fact He will be God. He will be the Son of God. Then he turns a corner here and you wonder why he does this. He says, "Think about your cousin Elizabeth. You know, the barren one? She's now in her sixth month." Then Gabriel says to Mary something that he or one of the other angels said all the way back in the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis to Sarah. Remember in the Old Testament in the Book of Genesis, Abraham had a barren wife named Sarah and God came to them and said, "You know what? You are going to have the child of promise. The Messiah's line will continue through you. You are going to have a child of promise." Do you remember Sarah's response to that? She laughed. She laughed at that because she was so cynical, and they ended up naming the child "laughter." His name was Isaac. But the question that the angel of the Lord said to her when he heard her laughing was what? Is anything impossible for God?" We're to take that as a rhetorical question. Here it's not a question; here it's a fact. Gabriel tells her, "Nothing, Mary, is impossible for God."

The question is not just for Mary, but also for us. Do you really believe that? Think about it. Do you have friends, family members, maybe parents, maybe children who don't go to church anymore? They've left the faith. You've just given up on them. You've given up on them because you think, "They're never going to change." Is your marriage tough and you've just given up on it? Maybe you're staying together, but you're miserable. Maybe you're working on it. Have you just given up or have you told yourself, "Nothing is impossible for God, Nothing"? Does that mean He's going to heal all of your diseases here and now? Does it mean He's going to help your marriage here and now? No, it doesn't. But does it mean you have hope that anything is possible? Is it possible that God would heal you? Is it possible? Yes, it is. We have to believe that. The question is, "What's the response?" Here's where Protestants, I think, lose it on Mary. We don't believe, and I don't believe Mary was a perpetual virgin because Jesus had brothers and sisters, and we assume Joseph was the father there. But Mary in this passage gives maybe the greatest example of what it means to understand the Gospel that you see in the whole New Testament. It's simple. Notice Mary's response to all of this.

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.* (ESV)

You see, it's not as much of a scandal if sinners look at themselves and say, "OK. You got me. I'm sinful. I'm a little bit self-righteous. I complain a lot. I'm not the best husband." My sisters, whenever they wanted to end an argument with me they'd go, "Oh, you're mister perfect. I'm the most horrible person." It's easy to say that about yourself. The harder thing is to do what Mary did. You see, it's one thing to see yourself as a sinner, it's another thing to say to God, "Here it is. Take it. Take this from me. Take my sin from me." Or even bigger than your sin, but they're all connected, is your control. Are you willing to give up control to God? Every person in this room I guarantee you is a control freak one way or the other. We all try and control our lives. We try and control those around us. We try and control our environment. We try and control everything. What Mary does here is say, "I'm your servant. Let it be to me as you have said. Here you go. You want my life? Take it. You want control of my life? Take it." The question is, "Are you willing to give up that control?" If you're a Christian, are you willing to give up that control? Some of you have been Christians for 20, 30, 40 years and you still are struggling with giving it up. Give it up. Some of you are not Christians and you grapple. You say, "Man, if I give up this then I wouldn't have that anymore." Or, "If I grabbed Jesus, I'd have to get rid of that." Maybe you would, but you only know if you ask him, not me. So, think about it. What's your response to the Gospel whether you're a Christian or not. Do you go to Jesus with open hands or do you go to him with one hand clasped and one hand open. Think about it.