

# *The Inconceivable Conception*

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 18, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Commentator N.T. Wright reminds us that newspaper and magazine editors know that there are three categories of stories which always sell the most copies: sex scandals, celebrity news and religion. For instance, the headline, "MOVIE STAR'S LOVE CHILD" is guaranteed to sell magazines. Change the headline to "PRINCESS HAS SECRET AFFAIR" and you will sell even more copies. And if your breaking story is, "KING'S SECRET NIGHT WITH NUN", your story will dominate the news for months.<sup>1</sup>

The story we just read has all three. None other than the angel Gabriel is visiting an unmarried virgin named Mary to give her a message from God that she is about to give birth to the future King of the World. Celebrity, scandal and religion all wrapped into one. It's the story every editor dreams of publishing. And this story really happened!

One day the angel Gabriel comes to Mary with news that she is about to conceive a child. In some ways it's the sort of announcement which happens countless times every day to expectant mothers, though usually through more conventional means. In other ways, however, it's the sort of announcement that had never happened before and has never happened since, because the child who is to be conceived is none other than the Savior of the world. This is the Messiah who had been promised long before to Israel, the one for whom generations of Israelites had been waiting and watching. He was the One who was to come from God to set all things right, not only for Israel but for the entire world. Upon his arrival the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will dance, the poor will sing, the dead will live again.

Gabriel comes to bring this message because Gabriel is a messenger; that's what angels are. He's not making up the message, just passing it on. But even though he seems quite clear on the content of the message, I have to wonder if on the way to Mary's house he began to worry that perhaps he'd copied down the delivery address incorrectly. You know, it would have been one thing if God had sent him to deliver this message to the most beautiful and adored maiden in all the land, the princess of a great king living in the greatest city in the nation, a noble and strong lady everybody knew would one day do something extraordinary with her life. *That* address would have made sense. But that was not the address Gabriel was given.

Instead, the message was to be delivered to a young girl who was, in every way, ordinary at best. Put in our terms, this is the teenage daughter of a poor day-laborer living on the wrong side of the tracks in Lodi. Nothing about this young girl made her particularly noteworthy or obviously worthy of divine favor and purpose, especially to the level of bearing the very Messiah within her womb. And yet that is the address that was given to Gabriel and so that is where the angel

---

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 9.

faithfully went with his message, though, as writer Fredrick Buechner puts it, perhaps as he went he hoped nobody would notice “that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of this girl.”<sup>2</sup>

In some ways I can imagine what Gabriel must have been feeling. There have been occasions when I have felt called by God to deliver a message to somebody who I have not felt was, in my estimation, worthy of receiving such a message. There have been people I have felt called to tell are loved and forgiven who don’t seem to me to be lovable or forgivable. There have been people I have had to tell are called to lead in the church who, from what I can tell, don’t seem to have the qualifications of leadership. To be fair, sometimes I’m the one who doesn’t seem worthy to receive these messages. Thing is, they are not our messages to edit, only to deliver.

Gabriel clearly understood this, and so he follows his directions to a backwater town in Galilee to find a virgin engaged to a peasant carpenter named Joseph, who also just happened to be a distant descendant of King David. And it is in these small details, that we begin to get hints that tell us we shouldn’t be surprised by God’s choice. You see, every Jew in those days knew well that the Messiah would come from the line and family of David. Furthermore, the great prophet Isaiah had once given this sign to recognize the Messiah when he came: **“Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”**<sup>3</sup>, which means, “God with us.” In other words, there were enough hints given in the directions that certainly Gabriel, and perhaps even Mary herself, should not have been so surprised by God’s choice.

We’ve all watched those movies where in the final scene in the movie some unexpected and shocking twist is revealed which instantly makes sense of all sorts of things that happened beforehand in the movie. You watch a movie and get to a final scene that just blows your mind, all at once, helps make sense of all sorts of things in the rest of the movie. That’s the sort of movie that you have to watch a second time because when you do everything instantly takes on a deeper meaning.

To be fair, we have been watching this movie for 2,000 years. Mary, however, is watching it for the first time. And so even though we see hints all along the way that seem to point to the obvious, they are not obvious to her. How could they be? And really, it’s no different in our lives. Haven’t you ever had the experience of looking back on a season of your life and realizing, only in hindsight, all the ways which God’s hand was clearly at work along the way? Mary will one day have that experience, but for now she has no chance of making sense of the message she is about to receive.

The message begins this way, **“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”** Pause here and consider for a moment what this must have sounded like to Mary. Most of us wonder, at least occasionally, what God thinks of us. If there really is a Creator of this world, one who made us in the first place and will judge us in the last place, we can’t help but wonder what God thinks of us. I’ve wondered this and, to be honest, much of my life I’ve lived with a nagging fear that God is disappointed with me and disapproving of my life and, therefore, may not be all that interested in being with me, especially forever. He knows too much; that’s the problem. As a friend of mine recently said, “I know that God loves; I’m just not sure God loves *me*.”

So what would it be like to receive this message one day and to know, for certain, it was from God: “You are my favored one and I am with you.” Honestly, I wouldn’t need to hear that message every day. Just once would do it. If just once an angel would confirm my greatest hope and relieve my greatest fear and tell me that God really does love me and really does desire to share life with me, well I believe that from that point forward I could face just about anything life threw at me. Maybe you’re the same way.

This is the message Mary heard that day from the angel. And what was her reaction? Maybe joy, but also fear. It caused her trouble. That’s what Luke tells us. And as I think about it, I wonder if this is the same sort of fear that you’d experience if the CEO of the entire company found you in your tiny cubicle one day and told you that you had caught her eye and that she wanted you to come and work with her. Or if the head coach came and found you buried in your fourth-string spot on the bench and told you that he’d noticed you in practice and wanted you to get your helmet and stand next to him on the sidelines. You’d be scared, right? Excited, but scared. What could this mean? What is being asked of me here? Sometimes flying beneath the radar is something we actually prefer.

<sup>2</sup> Fredrick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1939), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14

Mary is afraid, afraid what consequences this greeting might hold in store. Sure enough, the angel confirms Mary's fear and drops a bombshell. Though he begins by telling her not to be afraid, and reminding her that God favors her, he then says to her, **"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."** The name Jesus, by the way, literally means "YHWH Saves", and later in his message the angel spells this out. **"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."**

The first time I found out we were going to have a child I didn't know a thing about her, not even that she was a she. Still, the fact alone that I was going to be a parent took my breath away and instantly filled me with a potent combination of joy and fear. By contrast, this young girl, who is not yet married and has never had sex, is now not only going to have a child but a child who is the eternal Son of God and the King and Savior of all creation. How do you put all that on your birth announcements? How in the world could Mary have ever grasped this news of God's call on her life?

I'm not sure even the benefit of hindsight helps us to grasp it. Still, there are some clear implications to this call she receives, implications not only for Mary but for us as well. I can think of at least four.

First, apparently God sometimes, maybe lots of the time, prefers to call ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Commentator Joel Green writes, "[In Mary], God has given favor to one who had no claim to worthy status, raised her up from a position of lowliness, and has chosen her to have a central role in salvation history."<sup>4</sup> Of course, this shouldn't surprise us. Any overview of biblical history quickly uncovers this trend.

Noah was a drunk. Abraham and Sarah were in the old folks home. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar. Moses had a criminal past and a speech impediment. Gideon was a chicken. Samson was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. David was a runt. Naomi was a widow. Elijah was suicidal. Matthew was a sell out. Peter was a blowhard. Paul was a terrorist. Lazarus was dead!<sup>5</sup> And yet these are the sorts of ordinary, imperfect people God called. Now, if God can use them to do the eternal work of his kingdom, I have to imagine that not a single person in this room is therefore disqualified because of our ordinary-ness or imperfections. I'm not sure if that comes across as good news or bad news, but it's the truth. You are the sort of person God could use to do great things.

Second, clearly sometimes there is a cost that comes with God's call. For Mary the cost was great. At the outset, the cost was scandal. Remember, Mary is not married. She is now pregnant. For better or worse that may not be such a big deal these days, but it was back then. Just for starters, how do you explain to your husband-to-be that you're pregnant even though the two of you have never had sex? That's not an easy conversation to have. Thankfully, Joseph received his own angel visitation to confirm Mary's story, but even if he believed it, what about Mary's parents, and her friends, and her neighbors, and the people good folks in the pews at synagogue on Saturday? And in some ways, the scandal was the easy part. In time she would have to stand by and watch helplessly as her son was mocked, and tortured, and executed for crimes he never committed.

But again, go back through scripture and review the lives of those God has called and the trend cannot be missed. All of those people I mentioned earlier paid a price for their call to follow God for God never calls people to follow him down a road of comfort and ease because that's not the road he's on. Yes, when Jesus came he came to travel a road that ultimately leads to life, but it was a narrow and often lonely road that first led through death. This is why lots of people don't want God to call them. They rightly understand that such a call always comes with a heavy cross to bear.

Third, it's also clear here from Mary's story that sometimes the call is mysterious. How in the world could Mary have ever conceived (no pun intended) what was about to happen to her? Even though people in her day couldn't have told you a thing about X and Y chromosomes, they knew enough to know where babies come from, which is to say that she knew enough to know that there had never been one single woman in the history of the planet who had conceived a child within her without a man, some man, being involved in some way. There are no spontaneous conceptions.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Green, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Taken in part from <http://www.jollynotes.com/biblical-examples-of-imperfect-people-god-used-in-the-bible/>

This is one place where hindsight doesn't even help us all that much. Even from our perspective, we struggle to understand the virgin birth. In the end, it's something we can only accept in faith. But if we start from the virgin birth itself we may never even be able to do that. We have to start at the other ends and work towards it. First we have to begin at creation and remember that God created, out of nothing, everything that exists. And so if God once put the world into empty nothingness, then maybe we can work forwards and realize that God certainly must be capable of putting a baby in an empty womb as well. Second, from the other end we remember that Jesus performed countless miracles and ultimately rose from the dead after being in the tomb for three days. Now, if we can believe this, then maybe we can work backwards to the virgin birth and confess that even though it isn't what we expected from the Messiah as an entrance, somehow it still has the ring of truth about it.<sup>6</sup>

Still, even for us sometimes God's call doesn't make sense. Kathy Keller is a missionary in Paris supported by this church. Before that she was a missionary in Tanzania for many years. She'd learned the language, developed a strong network of relationships and community, and was involved there in blossoming ministry that was beginning to bear long-awaited fruit. But then God up and called her to Paris, a city mostly unknown to her, full of people she didn't know speaking a language she didn't know. That doesn't make sense to me. I'm not sure it made sense to Kathy. But she went anyway because she believed it was God's call.

This happens to us all the time in much less dramatic ways. God may call you to make a financial pledge to the church next year you're not sure will fit in your budget. God may call you to share the Gospel with somebody you imagine has absolutely no interest in hearing what you have to say. God may call you to not worry about some possible outcome you believe is inevitable and disastrous. God may call you to a task for which you feel completely ill-equipped. This is what God does. He often calls us to something that, from our perspective, makes absolutely no sense and asks us to trust *him* instead of trusting our logic, our experience, our resources or our instincts.

Finally, even though God's call comes to ordinary people, carries with it a significant personal cost, often makes little to no sense, it does not come with an expectation that we will answer it alone. In Mary's case, don't miss the distinction. She is not being asked to save the world herself but rather to allow the Savior to enter the world through her. When presented with this unfathomable call, Mary naturally asks the angel, "**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**" And the angel answers 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 holy; he will be called Son of God.**"

These are some of the most mysterious words in all of scripture but they do convey one very clear truth. Mary is not being asked to respond to this call alone. The Father of this child is no human father but God himself. Therefore, though this child will be conceived in human flesh he will also be divine in nature, the very Son of God growing and emerging from within her. All of this is to be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, God is doing what God always does, calling people to something that, on their own, would be impossible, but is making it possible because he is the one who is working from above and within to make it such.

This is the gist of Gabriel's response to Mary's question when he reminds her that her cousin Elizabeth, though an old and barren woman, has already conceived a son. The reminder ought to bring to mind for us, as it may have for Mary, the fact that the Bible is littered with examples of God bringing life from the wombs of all sorts of old, barren women, not to mention all the other seemingly impossible things God has done through people he has called. And so we ought to be reminded that though God calls us to the impossible he does not expect the impossible from us but only that we allow ourselves to be used by him to do what for him is possible because, of course, with God all things are possible. And so maybe all God wants from us is not our ability but our availability.

This Mary can offer, which she does in words that have rung ever since down through history as a model of what the human response to God's call ought to be. "**Here am I,**" she says, "**the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**" It is an absolutely stunning response, not spoken out of strength or ability, or even out of confidence or certainty, but simply spoken out of faith. Even though she doesn't see how in the world she is qualified, and she can't see how she will ever be able to bear the burden and hardship which is about to be placed on her, and she certainly will never completely understand what God is doing here, she can still surrender to God because she trusts God.

---

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright says something like this in *Luke for Everyone*, 11.

And it is the same with us. God does not need us. Do you realize that? God is coming to save and renew our world and it is a job God can do without us. We have nothing to offer God that he does not already have. The burden of the work is far too much for us to bear. We can't even understand his plans in the first place. Still, God chooses us and partners with us so that, like Mary, we might be given crucial roles in salvation history.

Now, I do not know the specifics of God's call on your life. It is never the same for any two of us. Sometimes, yes, God's call does have giant implications as when God calls us to take major leaps of faith as we choose vocations, or mates, or investments, or homes. Other times, however, the call comes simply as a nudge to use five minutes of a day in a different way than we were planning to use those five minutes. Either way, we will do well in responding to God's call if we learn from the example of Mary.

May we never believe the lie that we are too ordinary for God to use us. We may well be ordinary, but God seems to prefer to use ordinary tools to accomplish extraordinary things, perhaps so that nobody makes the mistake of giving the tools all the glory.

May we expect that God's call will not be easy. If we remember this we will not be surprised when hardship comes and thus we will be kept from doubting and losing faith. The way of Jesus is the way of death but it leads, ultimately, to life.

May we learn to live in the tension of mystery. We can never expect full disclosure on God's part when it comes to his plans for God wants us to trust him, not the plans.

Finally, may we know that we are never alone in the call. Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is with us, even within us, not only guiding us along the way but empowering every step.

One last thing before I finish. Notice that once Mary agreed to surrender and make herself available, no bells and whistles sounded and no fireworks went off. No awards were given. No more details of the plan were revealed. As the story ends we are simply told, "**Then the angel departed from her.**" In other words, once the smoke cleared things instantly looked like normal again. Anybody walking by the moment just after the angel's exit would only have seen a common peasant girl sitting there, one of a thousand more just like her in that town.

That's how God's call usually comes, not like a hurricane that blows through and immediately changes everything about the landscape, but more like a gentle breeze that simply begins to rustle the leaves. And yet beneath the surface, something truly inconceivable is conceived and begins, slowly, to grow. And then as we watch and wait, God will begin to move. He already has been. Only now we'll begin to notice because we will be moving along with him. And in time, and by his grace, and as we wait and continue to surrender, we will eventually look back and see that he has used us, even the most ordinary among us, to do extraordinary things from the perspective of heaven.

And so whatever God's call upon your life might be, may you and I, along with Mary, respond in this way, even with these words: "Here I am. I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.



## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 1:26-38 again. Though it's a familiar story, is there anything here you never noticed until now?
2. If this were the only passage we had from the Bible available to us, what things would we learn here about Jesus?
3. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God and that God is with her. Why does this make Mary afraid? Shouldn't this be good news?
4. Why would God choose Mary? Was this an obvious choice or not?

5. Has God ever called you to do something or to go somewhere or to give something away and that call made absolutely no sense to you? How did you respond?
6. Imagine somebody asks you this question: "What is God's call for you in your life?" How would you answer?
7. Is there an area of your life where you need to believe that "nothing is impossible with God"?
8. Missionary Hudson Taylor once said, "I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help him. I ended up by asking Him to do His work through me." Which one of these best describes you at this time in your life?



### **Table to Table**

#### ***Questions for kids and adults to answer together***

What is the hardest thing that God has ever asked you to do?

Did you do it? Did God help you do it?