



## Sermon

### ***The Annunciation***

**Luke 1:26-38; 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16**

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The claim of the Christian Gospel is that Jesus is the Christ – the Anointed One or Messiah, the one promised to the Jewish people as their eternal King who would bring justice and rule rightly. 332 statements about this person written in the Old Testament all over 400 years before he lived have been identified as being true of him.

A statistician has calculated that the probability of just 48 prophecies being fulfilled in one life by chance is 1:10<sup>157</sup>. That is 1 with 157 zeroes after it. If it helps the estimated number of stars in the universe is 10<sup>20</sup>!

One of those prophecies, we heard from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel. David had achieved security from the enemies that had beset his people. He had built his own palace and thought he should honour God with a better place of worship than the Tabernacle.

God's reply surprises both David and Nathan the prophet: You will not make a house for me – I will make your family into a house – a dynasty. He went on to tell both of what would happen in the short term with Solomon building a temple but also an eternal heritage, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the Messiah had been around already but in this passage it first becomes clear that he will be a descendent of David. Yet there was mystery. People pondered it and could not understand – how would this promise be fulfilled? What would happen? What about the years when there was no king reigning? From our perspective, as Paul said in the end of Romans, it is a mystery revealed – now we understand.

In today's gospel, as Christmas approaches, Luke has recorded the announcement of the One in whom those prophecies started to come to pass.

#### **The Angel**

It starts with an angel appearing to a young Jewish girl probably about 13-14 years old. Now, if you are boggling about angels, there are many modern reports of people meeting a person who helps them and then disappears, whom they conclude must have been an angel. The closest I have knowingly come to that, is when Helen and Vivienne, a Swedish pastor's wife, were praying for a woman in a church in Stockholm. Afterwards, the woman asked who the third person was who was praying for her. They said there were just two of them. The woman replied that she had opened her eyes and seen them and a third person dressed in white standing there by her.

A member of this parish has told me of seeing an angel listening carefully to her words when she was praying.

#### **Virgin Conception**

The angel had a message for Mary that she had been chosen to carry the Son of God and that would happen without sexual relations.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 7:16

Well Mary naturally wonders how this is going to happen when the angel makes his announcement.

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

This is not some crude Greek myth where Zeus lusts after a girl and has a child by her; there is no sexual act.

John Nolland in the "Word Commentary" argues against the suggestion that this is a pagan myth imported into early Christian thinking. Such myths move in a totally different world of thought. Furthermore, even amongst Jews living under Greek dominance there was no trace of the adoption of Greek myths. He concludes:

The similarity regularly claimed between Luke 1:35 and pagan myths is based finally on a superficial reading of [Luke's] text.<sup>2</sup>

Gabriel says the Holy Spirit will overshadow her – the term is like a cloud overshadowing. The Spiritual presence of God will cover her and create within her this new life, just as in the beginning the Holy Spirit brooded over the planet and created life. If God created the universe, why would we think this difficult?

Luke started his gospel with a statement:

<sup>3</sup> I ... decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

He determined to be an accurate reporter of these important events. This Virgin birth idea is not something you'd invent to make your story more believable! In fact you'd probably leave it out if you could – unless you had to include it because it was true!

### Miracles

Your attitude to miracles depends on your belief about God. Before I was a Christian I wasn't too sure about this virgin birth. I found it most improbable. But I have to say the night I asked God to forgive my sins, to save me and direct my life, that same night I knew that it was true. I immediately lost my doubt as God gave me his new life and put his Spirit in me.

And if you believe there is a God who designed and brought the universe into being and who sustains it and is responsible for the laws of that govern it, it is not irrational to believe he could intervene. *With God, as the angel said, Nothing is impossible.* (v37)

But let's think a bit more about miracles. A miracle can be defined as an event which cannot be produced by the natural causes operating at that time and place.

**The Linnean Society** is a Scientific Society in London which "uniquely embraces the entire sweep of biology, and particularly biological diversity and evolution." In a letter to *The Times* its president and 14 leading scientists (most of them university professors) said,

It is not logically valid to use science as an argument against miracles. To believe miracles cannot happen is as much an act of faith as to believe that they can happen... Miracles are unprecedented events. ... it is important to affirm that science (based as it is on the observation of precedents) can have nothing to say on the subject.

In other words, science describes what has been observed normally to occur. It deals with natural, repeatable events. So the law of gravity describes a force of attraction between masses. The application of the law says that if I release an apple it will fall to the ground. However, if I catch it, the law of gravity has not been broken. It is just that I have intervened. We might think of miracles in that way – God intervening. They are not against science they are beyond science.

### Who was this baby to be?

Mary was given some information about her future son:

<sup>31</sup> You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." ... <sup>35b</sup> So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

The angel tells Mary who the child is to be (32). He is named for a start – Jesus. It means in Hebrew, "God saves."

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<sup>2</sup>Evans, C. (1998). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 1:1-9:20* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

She is told that her baby will be the Son of the Most High (a title of God) – he will be the Son of God.

Then the angel adds that The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.

To any Jew, that would immediately register as *MESSIAH* - one who would be a ruler, a great prophet and a priest. Here is the fulfilment of God's promise to David that an eternal ruler would come from his descendants. We have already heard that Mary's betrothed was of the house of David. The child would be the adoptive son of Joseph and so legally a descendent of David. Add to that, most commentators understand that Mary was also of the house of David based on Luke's genealogy – so the child would have both legal and genetic inheritance from David.

That little baby in the manger, was more than a sweet baby. He was God himself coming to visit this planet in human form. Surely it is not at all unreasonable that his conception should be extraordinary.

If that were not enough to celebrate, the fact that he was coming to rescue us from all our wrong doing is even more wonderful. That is why we celebrate Christmas, that is why we give presents to celebrate this wonderful gift to us.

### **Risk for God**

But have you consider the level of risk involved in this happening? What about the risk for God?

Suppose Mary said no? Suppose the infant were killed or injured?

Not possible you say? God would protect him. But the fact that subsequently Joseph and Mary were warned to flee to Egypt to escape King Herod's search for the baby, says that there was the possibility of danger. If things were automatically safe, they could stay where they were and be protected.

Try to imagine for a moment, the eternal Son of God before he took human form, before he became Mary's baby. How would you feel about entrusting yourself to a peasant girl to care for you and raise you. Having to trust her vastly inferior knowledge and ability, making yourself helpless and vulnerable in her hands. Wouldn't that make you pause? I'd be hesitant to say yes to such a scheme!

### **Risk of Mary**

What about Mary?

Jewish betrothal was like engagement but it was an absolutely binding commitment allowing a time to prepare for actual marriage. Sexual unfaithfulness in this time was regarded like adultery and could in that culture incur the death penalty.

This miraculous conception would be sure to cause gossip, rumour, accusations. What would Joseph think? Would he abandon her. No social security. No benefits for unmarried mothers. She'd never get a husband with a record like that.

Luke records her reply as, <sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

That was courage! She was willing to trust God knew best and would work it out somehow. We know from Matthew's gospel that Joseph intended to break off the betrothal when he heard. He was going to divorce her until the angel spoke to him too, telling him,

<sup>20</sup>Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

It must have been a frightening time for them both until it was resolved.

What does Mary teach us in all this? Isn't it that trust prompts obedience.

### **Conclusion**

I hope we have seen three things from this passage:

That there is a supernatural dimension to life and you do not have to throw away your mind to accept that God may override normal natural events.

That little baby Jesus was not just a cute little bundle but he was God living with us.

That we need to be ready to obey God and trust it will be OK, even when it is beyond our understanding.

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