

Mary's Unwavering Faith

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you this fourth Sunday in Advent from God, our Father, and from the Lord, and Savior, Jesus, Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading for today is from the Gospel of Luke who has written the story of the First Coming of Jesus, His nativity, and His incarnation in much greater detail than any of the other Gospel writers. Most theologians believe this is because St. Luke interviewed Mary and many others who were witnesses to the events of the Nativity. The reading for today is the description of the annunciation - the announcement to Mary that she would be the woman who would conceive and give birth to Jesus. This birth announcement was delivered by the angel Gabriel.

You may wonder when this took place. Theologians from ancient to modern times have debated the date of the annunciation and determined that the date was March 25th. How did they come upon that date? There was a belief that people died on the day that they were conceived. Based on the dates of the Passover, scholars are 99% sure that Jesus died on March 25th, so it was believed that was the date He was conceived. Count back nine months and His birth is on December 25th. Now the date of the annunciation was important for another reason. It was established as the first day of the New Year by a now-obscure monk and abbot named Dionysius Exiguus from the 5th Century who lived in Rome. You probably have never heard of him, but you know the results of his work because he dated human history as before Jesus and after Jesus by using the terms B.C. and A.D. And, desiring to make the calendar represent Christianity, he designated March 25th as the first day of the civil year. That date was cemented by the Christian Council of Tours in 567. Most of the Christian nations of Europe accepted this calendar and, because the American colonies were an extension of British culture and practices, New Year's Day was celebrated here in the colonies until 1751.

Who was the angel Gabriel? Well, his name means *"God is my strength."* He is only one of two good angels that are named in the Bible. (I challenge you to find out the name of the other named good angel and let me know who it is). Gabriel carries out his role as a messenger of God by delivering important messages to three people in the Bible. In the Old Testament to Daniel (look at Daniel 9) and in the New Testament to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and to Mary in today's reading.

The other character in the annunciation story of St. Luke is Mary. She has a common name for women of her time. It is the equivalent of the Old Testament name of Miriam, the sister of Moses. Gabriel addresses her as the *"exalted one"* although the names Miriam and Mary both mean *"rebellious."* Mary is far from rebellious. When Gabriel appeared to her, she listened to what he had to say. Imagine if you opened the door this afternoon and an angel in all his radiant glory was standing there and addressed you. Imagine if you were only a teenager, as Mary was? Would you have the presence of mind to accept the words and process them in your mind? But Mary does this. She has probably already been betrothed to be married by her parents. Betrothal often took place shortly after puberty. I mentioned in a previous sermon that marriage customs in the Near East at the time meant that the engagement period lasted a long time. During this engagement period, a man and a woman were considered as husband and wife even though they lived apart and did not have sexual relations. If the wife proved unfaithful to her husband during this period, she could be stoned (Deut. 23:24-25). Only divorce or death could terminate the betrothal and from then on society considered them widow or widower.

Now, here comes, God's messenger to this young, betrothed girl and says she is going to get pregnant. And not just get pregnant, but to conceive the Messiah, the Son of God. The one who her people had been waiting thousands of years for. Mary was highly *"favored"* because God chose to bestow special grace on her. She would be the mother of the Messiah, which was an honor most Jewish mothers prayed would be theirs. Imagine what must have raced through her mind? How would you have reacted? Maybe you would have slammed the door in fear. Maybe you would have fainted. Maybe you would have protested and said you couldn't be the one

there must be a mistake. Mary's reaction was mixed. She appears to be a little upset, Luke says she was troubled. *"Troubled!"* Mary is faced with the presence of an angel and he tells her she is going to get pregnant and the child is to be the Messiah. Troubled might be an understatement of how Mary or one of us might feel. But Mary appears to regain her composure from this appearance and announcement. She only asks how this could be since she was a virgin – how would this happen? And Gabriel answered her question. The Holy Spirit would be God's enabling agent and make Jesus' supernatural conception and birth possible. So, the Holy Spirit would *"overshadow"* Mary with His presence. Beyond this Gabriel was not specific.

Now, it is interesting that the Greek word, *"episkiazo,"* translated as *"overshadow"* here, occurs in three other places in the Bible: the account of God settling on the tabernacle in the wilderness where He filled the tabernacle with His presence (Exod. 40:35); the account of the Transfiguration where the cloud overshadowed all those present (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34); and here to describe how Jesus would be conceived by God through the Holy Spirit in the body of Mary. How would you have responded to this explanation? Wow! Are you sure that is what will happen, Gabriel? What is this a scam? But Mary responds with these words: ***"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*** And the angel disappeared. Mary was left standing alone. The events which the angel announced to her were for her to contemplate.

According to Martin Luther *"There were three miracles of the Nativity: that God became man, that a virgin conceived, and that Mary believed. And the greatest of these was the last."*

I see two important lessons in this story: (1) the certainty that God will fulfill His promise and (2) showing that nothing is impossible with Him. Promises are easily broken. *"Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" "Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish, for better or for worse, till death do you part?" "Do you promise to support and defend the Constitution of the United States all enemies, foreign and domestic?" "Do you promise to be my best friend, pinky swear?" "I promise I will be at your _____."* And those promises are often

broken by us sinners. But the promises of God regarding the Messiah, every one of them, beginning with the one made in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve to the ones made by God to His people throughout Old Testament times to the ones made to you by Him: ***“Your sins are forgiven;”*** ***“I will be with you always...even to the end of the age;”*** and, ***“I go to prepare a place for you.”*** These promises of God were, and never will be broken.

And look at Mary's example as one chosen to serve God. She is an example that shows how God extends our obedience to His commands even beyond the willingness to trust in God and be used by Him. She is an example of how God can use the humblest among us in faith and fulfill His work well beyond our limitations but not His. How powerfully we see faith in God in the responses and actions of Mary. Not just faith but unwavering and complete humble faith. Faith as a servant. Faith as one who accepts God's will as ***“Thy will be done.”*** Not thy will be my will.

As you ponder this story today, consider the promises you may have broken and the faithfulness with which God has been faithful to you throughout your life. As you ponder this story today, consider the faith of a teenaged peasant girl who accepted the Word of God and faithfully obeyed His commands. And consider how God has also chosen you to serve Him and honored you to be His instruments in the world. How with God that which seems impossible is totally and utterly possible. Consider how you will answer God's announcement to you. Will it be: *“Oh not me?”* or *“Let it be to me according to Your Word.”*

The announcement to Mary was given by God's messenger in a rural village over 2,000 years ago. God's announcement to you, here in this place, may be as soft as a whisper, but God has chosen you to be faithful to Him just as He chose Mary. May you be inspired by the faithfulness of Mary to do God's bidding in Your life and may you always remember His faithfulness to you in the promises He has made. Promises to save you from your sins, to watch over you and protect you with His angels, and promises to bring you home to Him at the end of your days of service to Him. Like Mary, ponder these things and hold them in your heart. Amen.

Sola Scriptura Sola gratia. Sola fide. Solo Christo. Soli dei Gloria. Amen.