

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The last two Sundays the Gospel lessons have revolved around the coming of the messenger who was to prepare the people for the coming of the Christ. This messenger's coming was foretold long before by the prophets. His coming was announced to his father by another messenger, the angel Gabriel. John the Baptist came as that long-expected messenger. His was the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Years later, in the wilderness by the Jordan River, John prepared the people by calling the people to repentance and preaching of the coming kingdom of the Christ.

But this other messenger, Gabriel, the one who announced the miracle coming of John the Baptist — and it was a miracle, for Elizabeth was barren, and she and Zechariah were old — this other messenger was busy with his divine proclamations. This time it was not to a priest serving in the temple. This time it was to a seemingly insignificant young maid from a seemingly insignificant town in Galilee named Nazareth. But appearances can be deceiving, and these certainly were. Far from insignificant, all the world now knows the name of this young maid, and “*all generations [call her] blessed*” (Luke 1:48). And all the world knows of the town of Nazareth and of this young maid's son who would be identified by it.

This messenger appeared to this young maid whose name was Mary. It had been six months since he had spoken to Zechariah, and Elizabeth, Mary's relative, was quite pregnant. “*For nothing will be impossible with God.*” That truth is quite important for what the heavenly messenger was about to tell Mary. Elizabeth may have been barren; Mary was a virgin, Luke reports. Though betrothed to her husband Joseph, they had not yet come together as husband and wife; the marriage had not yet been consummated. Mary would later affirm this fact to the angel: “*I am a virgin,*” she said (according to the ESV), or actually, she said it more delicately: “a man I do not know.”

The angel Gabriel greeted Mary — maybe it was just “*Greetings,*” but the angel said, Χαίρε! Rejoice! And how appropriate was that greeting! Mary was about to hear astonishingly good news. That's what people do when they hear good news; they rejoice — like when Jesus was born. The angel said, “*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*” (Luke 2:10). On that occasion, not just the shepherds, but the whole host of heaven burst out in jubilant song: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased*” (Luke 2:14).

But nine months earlier, Mary doesn't know yet what to think. Here was a majestic angel; no doubt not just his greeting but also his appearance was troubling. In fact, she was afraid. What is happening here? What did this angel just say? I'm a “*favored one*”? What could that mean? And “*the Lord is with [me]*”? How so?

Mary tried to figure it all out, but surely her wildest imagination could not have foretold what the angel would say to her. “This is the Lord’s favor to you,” the angel told her: *“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.”* All of God’s promises for a Messiah ... all of Israel’s hopes for a Savior would come to fulfillment through this humble maid. Mary’s son would not just be the everlasting King, he would also be *“the Son of the Most High”*; He would be God Himself come in the flesh ... *“Immanuel”* ... *“God with us”* (Matt. 1:23).

The angel doesn’t tell Mary why she was to call her Son “Jesus,” but we know because Mary’s husband Joseph was given the same command: *“you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”* (Matt. 1:21). Jesus’ name reveals His purpose. He comes to save. Indeed, it takes this kind of divine intervention to save the world. It takes a king, being born, growing up, living a blameless life — one who is in every way like us except for sin. Moreover, atonement requires sacrifice; it requires blood; forgiveness requires the shedding of blood. And so a lamb is sacrificed, a lamb without spot or blemish, indeed, a lamb of priceless worth, shedding the blood that atones not just for our sins, but for the sins of the world, a lamb dying once for all people, everywhere, for all times.

Amazingly, Mary seems to take all that in stride. No problem. But, there was something she wanted to know. Gabriel, please tell me, “How is this going to happen? I’ve never known a man.” Gabriel answered, “God will take care of it through the Holy Spirit. He will do the impossible. He will work this miracle.”

Mary heard the answer spoken by God’s angel, and responded: *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”* God had worked another miracle. First, a child conceived in a virgin; second, Mary’s faith.

In speaking of the angel’s message to Mary, Luther quotes St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He said: “there are here three miracles: that God and man should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her” (Roland H. Bainton, *“Martin Luther’s Christmas Book,”* 15).

The second miracle — that Mary remained a virgin — is more than just about the conception of Jesus in the Virgin Mary’s womb. One can’t deny Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit and remain a Christian; that is fundamental to the Christian faith — think the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed; and to our Evangelical Lutheran faith — think the Augsburg Confession. But Bernard means that Mary remained a virgin even in and after the birthing process. That is not part of the universal Christian

confession; you can believe it as Bernard (and Luther) did, or not. When it comes to miracles, as Luther said, the “Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God.”

The first miracle mentioned— that God and man should be joined in this child — is a marvelous work of God; it’s “a greater miracle,” Luther declares, and by it God the Father set into motion the plan of salvation laid out from the foundation of the world, even before Adam and Eve’s fateful fall into sin.

But the third miracle — that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her — that was the “most amazing of all.” That Mary would believe the announcement of this messenger “that she, rather than some other virgin had been chosen to be the mother of God” was the greatest of these miracles (Bainton). Not only did the Holy Spirit conceive in Mary’s womb the Savior of the world, but He conceived in Mary’s heart the faith to believe it.

That latter miracle, the Holy Spirit continues to do for the whole Christian Church on earth. It’s not by our own reason or strength that we believe — indeed, who can believe this improbable thing? It goes against our experience; it goes against common sense. Thus, the president of Union Theological Seminary said in 2019: It’s “a bizarre claim” that “has nothing to do with Jesus’ message” (Nicholas Kristof, “Reverend, You Say the Virgin Birth Is ‘a Bizarre Claim’?”, The New York Times, April 20, 2019). Well, she may call herself a “Christian minister,” but she knows nothing of Jesus’ message or of the message of salvation in Christ in the Scriptures. She is an unbeliever who thinks that Christianity is “bankrupt” and “collapsing,” who wants “our children’s children to envision and build” a new religion.

We reject such messages and their messengers, for the Holy Spirit has worked a miracle in our hearts, too, through the word preached into our ears. How does this happen? It happens as we cling to the message of the angel, and of Jesus, and of the apostles and prophets. Hearing this message, the Holy Spirit moves us to believe and confess Jesus Christ, conceived by the same Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; we believe and confess Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, and was buried, and on the third day, improbably also, rose from the dead; we believe and confess Jesus Christ, who will come again in glory to take us to Himself in heaven. He will take us who believe in this faith, once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) by God’s messengers: John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel, by apostles and prophets, by evangelists, and now proclaimed by pastors. God grant us to believe their unified message, that we may be saved.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.