

***How Can This Be?***  
**A Sermon on Luke 1:26-38**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**December 24, 2017**

**Introduction**

We want to believe in miracles, especially on the last Sunday before Christmas. This story tells us of the miraculous birth of Jesus. Tradition has come to regard the point of this story as the virgin birth. Jesus must be the son of God because he was born of a virgin. That is not possible for humans; it is only possible for a son of God.

We live in an age of fact fundamentalism. That is one of the unfortunate consequences of the Age of Reason. I hope it is giving way to an Age of the Spirit. We don't believe something is true unless it is a historically and scientifically-verifiable fact. On the right are religious fundamentalists. They literalize all the miracles in the Bible. They worship Jesus because he is Superman—he has powers that no one else has ever had. On the left are the secular fundamentalists. Life is reduced to protoplasm and nerve endings and electrical impulses. There is no overarching meaning. Secular fundamentalists mock the stories in the Bible because they cannot be historical fact.

I believe in miracle stories, whether or not they are historically verifiable facts. They are artistic expressions of the author's deepest convictions. What is important is what they mean. What message is the author trying to convey through the miracle story? What do they tell us about what God is like?

**First Move: Moving Back the Christological Moment**

Today's text is called the Annunciation. An annunciation is the announcement by a divine messenger of a special birth. The most famous annunciations in the Old Testament are about the births of Isaac, Ishmael, Samuel and Samson. These stories follow the same literary pattern: the appearance of a divine figure, fear or confusion by the person who is addressed, announcement of the message, an objection by the person receiving the message, and a promise or blessing from the divine messenger.

Luke and Matthew create annunciation stories to describe the birth of Jesus. The annunciation to Mary in today's text immediately follows an annunciation to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will give birth to a son who will turn many people in Israel to return to God. Their son will be known as John the Baptist. Zechariah and

Elizabeth are old and Elizabeth is barren. It is a story that has echoes of Abraham and Sarah.

The angel Gabriel is sent by God to the village of Nazareth to address a girl named Mary. Mary is described as a παρθένη, which is usually translated as a virgin, but it literally means a teenager. It is the same word that appears in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which I called the Parable of the Ten Teenage Girls in a sermon last month. The emphasis is as much on Mary's youth as on her virginity.

This story has all the traditional components of an annunciation. The divine messenger approaches Mary and says, "Rejoice, favored one, the Lord [is] with you." Mary is confused and tries to sort out what he means by this. Then the messenger delivers the divine message: "You will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of [the] Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob into the ages, and there will be no end of his rule."

Notice how Jewish this message is. Gabriel does not describe Jesus as the ruler of the world. He says that God will give Jesus the throne of David and he will rule over the house of Jacob.

Luke believes that God is fulfilling Jewish hopes for a Messiah like David. Luke is drawing out all the elements in the divine promise that the prophet Nathan makes to David in 2 Samuel 7:8-16. Nathan tells David that it is not his place to build a temple, which is a house for God. That will fall to his son Solomon. Nathan says, "This is what the Lord God says: 'I will make your name great. God will establish a house for you. When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom. Your son is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.'"

This text in 2 Samuel 7 was the foundation for Jewish hopes of a Messiah. Luke tells his readers that their hopes are now fulfilled in the person of Jesus. There is a significant difference: Nathan told David that his descendants would rule forever, but Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus himself will rule forever.

Mary objects, "How can this be, for I have not known a man?" Gabriel answers, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cast a shadow over you; the one who is begotten holy will be called the Son of God."

Luke is drawing on a tradition that was expressed earlier by Paul. Paul's letters are the earliest things written in the New Testament, at least ten years before Mark and perhaps 30 years before Luke and Matthew. In Romans 1:2-3 Paul proclaims "the gospel that [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

regarding his Son, who was a descendant of David. Through the Spirit of holiness he was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In early Christian preaching, Jesus is enthroned at the resurrection. He is sitting at the right hand of God and made Lord and Messiah. That is what Paul is preaching in Romans 1. Ten years later, Mark moves the christological moment back to the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus comes up out of the water, a voice from heaven says, “You are my son, the beloved; in you I am well pleased.”

Matthew and Luke move the christological moment back further to the birth of Jesus. Matthew uses dreams instead of angels to deliver messages from God. That fits Matthew’s theology better. Matthew wants to emphasize the stories about Joseph and Moses in Egypt. Just as God appeared in dreams to Joseph, so an angel of the Lord appears to Jesus, the father of Jesus. Raymond Brown, a Catholic scholar who wrote *The Birth of the Messiah*, a definitive commentary on the birth stories in the gospels, makes a strong case that Luke is emphasizing Mary as a Poor One. The Hebrew word for the Poor Ones is *anawim*. It refers to a group of people in Israel that considered themselves to be totally dependent upon God for support. They were devout and pious, believing that they would be the holy remnant of Israel that would be saved by God.

Virginal conception is assumed but not emphasized in Luke’s story. Raymond Brown offers us a new way to look at the virgin birth—it means that the child to be born of the virgin is totally God’s work. God is engaging in a new burst of creativity.

Gabriel goes to Mary in Nazareth, a town to which no Old Testament expectations are attached. This is a sign of the newness of what God is doing.

This is totally God’s initiative. Mary is a young girl who is not yet married. She can have no yearning for a child or disappointment that she is barren, like Sarah and Elizabeth.

By moving the Christological moment back to conception, Luke tells us that there never was a moment on earth when Jesus was not the Son of God.

## **Second Move: The Holy Bursts into the Ordinary**

In Protestant theology, the extraordinary thing about Mary is her ordinariness. Mary is the first Christian disciple. When she receives the call from God, she responds, “Behold, the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me, according to your word.” She understands that her life is about to be rearranged and she embraces her new identity.

This is a story about the holy bursting into the ordinary. Mary's surprise visitor shatters our expectation that we are isolated from the holy while we are leading unassuming lives in out-of-the-way places.

We are reminded throughout our lives that we are not totally in charge of our destiny. When we receive startling news, we ask the same question that Mary asked, "How can this be?" God's ways open us up to the unexpected and the unimaginable.

My father was a Disciples of Christ minister and a professor of church history at Phillips University in Enid. Like so many preacher's kids, I stayed away from the church for a good part of my adult life. As I have told you before, it was the death of my mother in 1998 that drew me back to the church. She was the heart of our family and I was lost and searching for meaning.

I started attending First Christian Church of Edmond with my daughter, Mary Kate, in 2000, when she was six years old. I soaked it up. I studied the Bible and I started teaching the Sunday School class for second graders.

I went on the Walk to Emmaus in 2001. It is a spiritual retreat that is organized by the United Methodist Church. There are several retreats a year. They are limited to about 40 people. It is three days of lectures, prayer and worship. You bring a suitcase and spend all three days in a church; you put away your watches and cellphones and let the directors of the Walk plan your schedule. It is a little unsettling never knowing what time it is or what comes next. You accept that you are not in charge of your destiny.

You split up into small groups of six or eight and listen to 15 talks on different aspects of discipleship. After each talk, you have a discussion with the members of your small group about the theme of the talk. I kept asking the same question, "If we take this stuff seriously, it should affect our whole life. How does it change us while we are at work?"

Later that month I met with my pastor, John Reagan. Now I was troubled by theological questions. I was struggling to make sense of the cross. I asked John for help and for recommendations on books to read.

John said, "These are exactly the kinds of questions that I am trained in seminary to answer and I never get to. Have you ever thought about taking a class in seminary?"

I laughed. "No, thanks. I am very happy being a lawyer." He said he didn't mean to enroll in seminary, just take a class. He gave me books by Harold Kushner, Marcus Borg and Jon Sobrino, and they helped me.

I had just changed law firms. I had been on my own with one other partner for seven years and had just joined a big oil and gas firm that had been together for 25

years. I got rid of all my equipment for a small law office. I enjoyed not having to manage a law office. I could just focus on practicing law.

Six months after I joined the firm, the senior partner walked into my office and told me that the firm was splitting up. My immediate reaction was, “That’s it. I am going to enroll in seminary.”

## **Conclusion**

Because of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, the holy continues to break into our lives. When we become disciples, Jesus is in charge of our destiny.

God may come right out of the blue to call you to do something new. You may be called to serve as an officer at church or teach a class at Sunday School or organize a mission project. You may wonder whether you are up to it.

Ask yourself, “What would Mary do?” Most likely she would say, “Here I am. Send me.”

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