

4th Sunday of Advent - Gabriel to Mary

Luke 1:26-38

Turn to Luke 1. Our text today describes a miraculous birth. Actually our text describes a conversation between an angel named Gabriel, and a young woman named Mary.

In that conversation, Gabriel told Mary that she would become pregnant by God's miracle. While you're turning to Luke 1 we need to talk about the OT for a while.

Miracle Births The Bible has a history of miracle births. Not quite like Jesus' birth. These other miraculous births are all stories of a wife that could not have children.

The most striking stories are about the beginning of the nation Israel. God chose Israel to be his special people - that is true. But first he created that nation. Do you know that every single patriarchal wife was barren? Could not get pregnant? Every one of them?

The nation Israel started with one man, Abraham. Israel came from Abraham's descendants. Abraham's wife Sarah could not become pregnant even when she was a young wife. But when she was 90 she finally became pregnant and had Isaac.

Isaac grew and married Rebekah, but Rebekah also was childless. Isaac prayed for her, and then she had the twins Esau and Jacob.

Jacob married two sisters, Leah first and one week later Rachel. That's a great story, but not for today. Neither of them could become pregnant. God had pity on Leah, because Jacob like Rachel better than Leah, so God healed Leah and she had four sons.

Then Leah could not conceive any more. After some years passed God healed Leah again, and she had two more sons. Then, after all that, God healed Rachel, and she had two sons.

The point of these stories is *not only* that God healed women so that they could have families. That is true, but there is a bigger story. God was creating the nation of Israel. God promised Abraham that a nation would come from him, and that God would bless all the nations from the nation that came from Abraham.

But Abraham and Sarah could not have children. Isaac and Rebekah could not have children. Jacob and Leah could not have children. Jacob and Rachel could not have children. By what nation would God show his mercy and goodness to all nations?

These miracle births make clear that God *created* the nation Israel. That nation should not exist. Other family lines die out, and that one should have as well. Three generations in a row, it took a direct miracle of God just to keep the family line alive.

Miraculous births occur in the OT when a person will have an important role for all God's people. The mother becoming pregnant because of a healing makes clear that the good that comes from that person is pure gift from God. The stories of the patriarchal wives show that the existence of Israel is God's gift to the world.

Hundreds of years later, Boaz married Ruth, and had a son who was David's grandfather. But first it says that "*the LORD enabled Ruth to conceive.*" Apparently Ruth also was childless, but God healed this when she married Boaz (Ruth 4:13).

That means that king David and all that line of kings, right to the Messiah, was gift from God, because it began through God's miracle, healing Ruth so she could conceive.

So, do you get the flavour of these miraculous births? It means God is up to something big, and this person has a key role to play, and the healing that makes the mother able to become pregnant is God's quiet signature that shows that this big thing is from Him. The person is *not* just a gift to the mother. The person is a gift to all of God's people.

John the Baptist's birth, right at the start of Luke, is entirely like this. Now the birth of Jesus is a bigger miracle than these others. In these others there was a man and woman, making love to each other, only until God acted that never produced a child.

Gabriel announced to Mary something even bigger – there will not be a man in this picture at all.

Gabriel and Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

²⁶ *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

The *sixth month* ties this story to Zechariah and Elizabeth, a childless couple nearly as old as Abraham and Sarah. Elizabeth got pregnant for the first time in her old age, and her child was the one we know as John the Baptist.

Mary was engaged to Joseph, and Joseph was a descendant of David. We don't get any information like that about Mary, although later we find out that Mary was related to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron (1:5), so maybe Mary as well.

Gabriel spoke three times to Mary, and each time there was a response from Mary, so we'll go through the conversation that way.

Gabriel's Greeting - ²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."* In the OT, when God's message came this way, it amounted to God saying, "I am about to do something important; and I'm going to do it through you. I will guard you and give you the ability to do this."

Mary's Unhappy Wondering - ²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*

By the end of Luke 1 we find out that Mary has lots of courage, and she's devoted to God. But her first reaction was not like that.

Gabriel Comforts and Explains - ³⁰ *But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. These are kind words. Gabriel says that there is nothing in this for Mary to fear; God wants to pour out his kindness on her.*

³¹*You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.* ³²*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,* ³³*and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Gabriel's explanation comes in two parts. First he says what will happen to Mary – she will become pregnant and give birth to a son. Then he explains what that son will be like, and that's the real point of this whole event.

Gabriel says that the child will be great, which is a strong word but not specific, and then Gabriel gives four more lines, each one by itself saying that the child will be the Messiah.

1. *He will be called the Son of the Most High.*
2. *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,*
3. *He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever;*
4. *His kingdom will never end.*

All four of these come from the message that the prophet Nathan gave to king David, when God told David that David's line of kings would rule Israel forever (2 Samuel 7).

He will be called the Son of the Most High. "Son of God" in the church has come to mean the deity of Christ, that he was God come as a human. But Jews used "son of God" in a different way.

When Nathan took God's message to David, it included this, that whatever descendant of David was on the throne, God would be like a father to that king, and that king would be like a son to him. It did not mean deity; it described God's steady kindness to that king.

So the Jews used "son of God" to mean the Messiah, the descendant of David that God would treat like a son, and that would be like a son to God. So when Mary heard the words, "*he will be called the Son of the Most High,*" she heard, "Your son will be the Christ, the Messiah."

The other three lines all mean the same thing, and they all use language that comes from Nathan's words to David : *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,* ³³ *and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*

So that's the message of Gabriel so far: you will have a child, and your child will be the Messiah.

Mary's Confusion - ³⁴ *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

The translators have taken liberty here that I'm not sure about. A more literal translation would be *"How will this be, since I do not know a man?"* I am not living with a man, I am not in relationship with a man, so how can I have get pregnant and have a baby?

It is hard to understand Mary's question. Mary was engaged to be married to a man who was in David's line. Why did she not take Gabriel's words to mean that when she married Joseph, she would have a child that would be the Christ?

We need to assume that Gabriel must have made clear to her in some way that she was going to conceive soon, in the next few days perhaps, and that her marriage was still months away. Somehow it was clear to her that Joseph was not going to father this child.

Gabriel's Further Explanation - ³⁵ *The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."*

It turns out that Mary asked the right question, and the answer was that this child would be a miracle child in a greater way than Isaac or John the Baptist or those others I mentioned earlier. In their case, there was normal sexual behaviour between a husband and wife, it had just never produced pregnancy.

But with Mary's child, there would not be normal sexual behaviour at all. It would be a pure act of God. The angel says, *this is why the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God*. Why? Because God would do what father's normally do.

I imagine Mary saying to herself at this point: "Oh, *that* kind of 'son of God'."

The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. These words are figurative. They don't sound like she will immediately conceive, and they certainly do not describe any sexual activity. But they do make clear that God will cause this pregnancy.

Now we need to go back to an earlier line of Gabriel: *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David*. "His father David?" How is David his father? This child is not in David's line. Mary was engaged to a man in David's line, we read that at the start.

But that Joseph would not be the child's father. So how can Gabriel say that Jesus is a descendant of David?

This only works if Joseph goes through with the wedding, and adopts this mystery child as his own. If Joseph did not go through with this wedding, *and* adopt this child, then Jesus would still be the miraculous child, perhaps the Saviour of the world.

But Jesus would not have a right to David's throne, Jesus could not be the Christ. The Christ needed to be a descendant of David.

Mary the Model Disciple - ³⁸ *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

Mary must have felt quickly that this child could end her wedding plans. She would be already pregnant at the wedding, and her groom would not be the father. Would Joseph do that? Trouble was on the horizon for her, and she probably felt that. But God wanted to cause this pregnancy in her, God chose her for this, so she was in, full speed ahead.

There's another side to this. Some have said of this story, "God is no better than men. Men decide, 'this woman is going to have my child, it's my choice, it's going to happen whether she wants it or not'." Some men do indeed carry on like that. But not God.

This last line of Mary's shows that Mary was willing to be this child's mother, and also that her agreement was important enough to record. Mary was not passive.

It was not her idea, it was God's idea. But Mary was entirely willing to mother this child, and the Scripture makes a point of recording her willingness. In the Bible, when an angel takes a message to a person, it is not very often that the person gets the last word.

But in this conversation Mary gets the last word. It's an important line. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

Mary submitted immediately. That only happens when people are already in the habit of obeying God. Her obedience and submission to God did not start on this day. For that reason she was the chosen mother.

Her last words are a model for every child of God, every follower of Christ. Her word "servant" is *doulos* in Greek, "slave." "I am the Lord's slave." In other words, *"The Lord owns me. May your word to me be fulfilled."*

From Mary to Us This is a good story, but what has it got to do with us? The answer: this child is God's gift to each one of us. This is why the OT history of miraculous births is important.

The miraculous births happen when God wants to be kind and merciful and helpful to MANY people. They always were a wonderful thing for the mother, the parents, but they only happen when God is also thinking about a lot of other people.

I want each of you to imagine a strong invisible line going from you right now to this conversation between Gabriel and Mary. It was a different time and different place.

But imagine this invisible wire going straight through all the years and all the mountains, from Gabriel's announcement to you here today.

THAT child is for YOU. That child, Jesus the Messiah, was not for any person at any time, not more for any other than that child is for you. That pregnancy, when the Holy Spirit came on Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed Mary, that pregnancy was for you. It was not for any other more than it was for you.

Gabriel was announcing God's gift to YOU. A direct line connects YOU to that announcement, and connects YOU to that miraculous pregnancy.

In Isaiah chapter 9 we read, "to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders."

In Luke 2, on the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem, an angel said to shepherds guarding their flocks, "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born TO YOU."

Later in Luke 2, when Joseph and Mary took 8 day old Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised, old Simeon the prophet took the baby in his arms and said to God, "*My eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*"

All nations, Gentiles, are included in those who can say, "this child is for us, this child is for me."

Later Mary herself says: *The Mighty One has done great things for ME – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.*

Mary knew that God had given her a great gift. She also knew that this child was God's mercy to generation after generation of people who honoured God.

Each of you can say: "A child was born for me, a son was given for me, a Saviour was born for me, he is a light to reveal God to me, this child is God showing mercy to me."

The child is God's gift to each of you, and to me. There is a direct line joining each of us to Gabriel's words to Mary, and to that pregnancy. No one on the planet, at any time, has any more right to say "That pregnancy is God's gift to me" than you do.

Our Father in heaven, thank you that this pregnancy was for us. Thank you that to us a child was born. Thank you that to us a son was given. Thank you that in the town of David a Saviour was born for us. Thank you for preparing a rescue in the sight of all nations, and you showed it to us. Thank you that this child, Jesus, was you showing your kindness to each of us, your mercy and generosity to each of us. Thank you.