

# THE REAL MIRACLE

Luke 1:26-38

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 24, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 1, verses 26 through 38. In this gospel lesson, we hear the real miracle of Christmas. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 1, beginning at verse 26, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This is the real miracle of Christmas. Later this evening, when we hear of Jesus' birth from Luke chapter 2, you might expect to hear a miraculous story. But there was no miracle at his birth, at least, not in Bethlehem. Out in the country, where the angels appeared to the shepherds, that was supernatural. But there was nothing miraculous, supernatural, or even extraordinary in Bethlehem. If anything, the scene in Bethlehem was sub-ordinary.

The real miracle of Christmas took place in Nazareth of Galilee, nine months earlier, when the angel Gabriel announced the conception of the Christ to a young virgin.

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Technically, we are still in the season of Advent this morning. Christmas officially starts when it gets dark tonight. The season of Advent is kind of Christmassy, but it's not full-on happy time. It's also a season of repentance and longing for Christ's Second Coming.

The world starts Christmas early, right after Thanksgiving. For the world, Christmas is about commerce, so they prepare by buying and selling things. But for us, Christmas is about the arrival of the Son of God in human flesh. So we prepare with a season of repentance. We try to hold back on Christmas a little bit, because we fear God. We know that we are unworthy sinners. So we prepare for his coming by examining our hearts and repenting of our sins. By the Fourth Sunday of Advent, though, we are very near Christmas, and the Scripture readings get a bit more Christmassy.

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This year the text is what we call "The Annunciation." A simpler name for it would be "The Announcement." It's when the angel Gabriel comes to announce the conception of the Christ child to Mary. This is the closest we can pinpoint the actual moment of incarnation for the Son of God. It was either sometime during this announcement, or very soon after it, because after the announcement, Mary goes with haste to visit her relative Elizabeth, which was just a couple days' journey, and by the time she gets there the text is quite clear that she is pregnant (1:39-45).

Luther maintained that it was the Word of God, spoken by the angel, that the Holy Spirit used to conceive the Christ child in Mary. I think he's right, though we can't say with absolute certainty.

But there are a couple reasons in the text that lead us to think that it was probably during this announcement. First, God has a history of creating things through his Word, and the angel speaks the Word of God to Mary. This history of God creating things through his Word goes all the way back to the creation of the world. And there's a reference to the creation of the world in Gabriel's announcement. Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). This is similar to what the Holy Spirit did in Genesis 1. Genesis says, "The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was (Gen. 1:2-3). The Spirit hovers, God speaks, and what God speaks becomes reality.

The other reason from the text that indicates that the incarnation has occurred is the way Mary receives the proclamation. Earlier in the text, Mary was somewhat confused. When Gabriel announced that she would have a child, she asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (1:34). She's not doubting, and there's nothing sinful about her question, but she wants some explanation. So Gabriel explains the promise further, Mary understands, and she receives the promise in faith. Finally she says, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). The Word of the Lord, spoken by Gabriel, created this response of faith. And this, I think, is the most likely place to pinpoint the incarnation. Through faith, Mary received the promise in her heart and in her womb. I suppose it's possible that it happened shortly later. Maybe it was while she was sleeping that night or some other time that the Holy Spirit came upon her, but it's just not typical of God to work outside of his Word. And even if our speculation is wrong, we can't be off by more than a few days. Because within a few days she was standing in the house of her relative Elizabeth, and the fetus John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb, and Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (1:42-43). By that point there is definitely a baby, and Elizabeth knows it through her unborn son, who was already a prophet.

The virgin conception of Jesus is an essential element of the Christian faith. A person cannot rightly call themselves a Christian while denying the virgin conception.

It is clearly taught in both Matthew and Luke, but also prophesied of in Isaiah 7. It's that familiar prophecy we often hear on Christmas, where the LORD says to King Ahaz, "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). The skeptics say that the Hebrew word (עַלְמָה, *almah*) doesn't necessarily mean "virgin" the same way we use it today. And that much is true. The word can mean a literal virgin or just a young woman. However, it is obvious from the context that the LORD means a literal virgin. Otherwise, it wouldn't be much of a sign. Young women conceive children quite regularly. The only way it's a sign is if there's a miracle about it. And when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, a few hundred years *before* Jesus was born, the Jewish translators recognized this and used the Greek word that refers to a literal virgin (παρθένος). So yes, not only is the virgin conception clearly taught in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but it is also prophesied in the Old Testament. There's no reason to disbelieve it unless you just don't believe God performs miracles, in which case I don't know why someone would even claim to be a Christian. A person cannot rightly call themselves a Christian while denying the virgin conception.

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It's a bit strange for historians to record a person's conception. It's the part of a person's biography that we usually leave alone, because it's not really anybody's business. But the Bible is kind of weird in the sense that, for a number of individuals, it does record their conceptions. Sometimes the Bible makes it our business. This usually occurs when there is something miraculous about it. I'll give you a few examples, and all these examples set us up for the virgin conception of the Christ. If God can give babies to elderly or barren women, he can also give a baby to a virgin.

First, we think of the conception of Isaac. This took place when his father, Abraham, was ninety-nine years old, and his mother, Sarah, was ninety. God had promised them a child, but he made them wait until old age, so it became very obvious that it was God's intervention.

We also think of Jacob's wife Rachel, who was barren until the LORD opened her womb and she conceived and bore Joseph.

And we think of Hannah, who was also barren and prayed for a child. Finally, God heard her prayer, and Hannah conceived and bore Samuel, who grew up to be a great prophet.

And shortly before Jesus' birth, we think of John the Baptist. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth were "advanced in years" (1:7). That's the Bible's way of saying, "Really old." But the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and promised that Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son. But Zechariah didn't believe it. That confirms that they were old enough for such things to be practically impossible. Zechariah was a true believer (1:6), but he didn't even believe it when an angel appeared to him. Then it happened.

Jesus' conception, of course, is the most miraculous. In the case of mothers who were barren or advanced in age, conceiving a child was extremely improbable, but not necessarily impossible. But the virgin conception takes us from the realm of improbable to impossible.

The general reason the Bible records some of these miraculous conceptions is to reveal the hand of God behind the existence of certain persons. But it also reminds us that every child is the creation of the LORD. We might try to conceive, or we might try to not conceive. But we learn, over and over again, or at least we should learn, that life is the work of God. So when a child is

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unwanted, or when a child is conceived through circumstances we should repent of, we should still recognize the creation of that child as the work of God. And if it is the work of God, then it is a gift, and we should rejoice in the creation of that child.

So God usually brings life into existence through the natural order, which he created. But when God circumvents his own natural order, he does it reveal that he has some special plan for this person.

So for Jesus, the first and most basic thing we learn from the virgin conception is that God has a special plan for him. And since the virgin conception is a step beyond all the other miraculous conceptions, God's plan for Jesus must exceed all of those prophets or patriarchs that came before. This doesn't reveal the full extent of how superior Jesus is to everyone who came before; it simply reveals that he is superior.

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But there are at least two more things we learn from the virgin conception. And these both require a little more background. So we're going to hop in our Way Back Old Testament Machine and crank it up about as far as it goes.

We go all the way back to Genesis 3 and the fall into sin. Just after Adam and Eve ate from the tree that the LORD commanded them not to eat from, God tracks them down. In fact, the serpent is still there, so the LORD God curses the serpent and says to him,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

Adam and Eve overhear this, so the curse of the serpent becomes the first gospel promise to them. God doesn't waste any time. He will not allow the devil to destroy his creation, and especially not his beloved children. He immediately promises a Savior. He promises that this Savior will strike the serpent's head. There will be warfare between the serpent and this Savior. The serpent will strike the Savior's heel. That is, he will strike a non-fatal blow. This is the crucifixion of Jesus. It looked like a fatal blow, but on the third day it was revealed that it was really a fatal blow for the serpent. The devil struck Jesus' heel, and Jesus crushed the devil's head when, by atoning for the sin of the world, he took away the devil's power to accuse.

Now you might be wondering, *What does this have to do with Gabriel's visit to Mary?* This Savior is referred to as the offspring of the woman. Literally, it's the *seed* of the woman. And that's different from the way we normally speak of procreation. The woman contributes the egg and the womb, while the man contributes the seed. The ancients figured this out quite quickly. And God, of course, has always known this; he designed nature this way. But God says to the serpent that the seed of the *woman* will crush his head. There's no man involved. So Genesis 3:15 is not only the first gospel promise; it's also the first prophecy of the virgin conception.

So the second thing we learn from the virgin conception is that this child in Mary's womb is the promised seed of the woman who will crush the serpent's head. He is the Savior who will defeat Satan and free us from his tyranny.

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And then the third thing we learn from the virgin conception is that Jesus is conceived and born without sin. This also goes back to the fall into sin. The sin of all mankind is specifically attributed to Adam (Rom. 5:12-14). And sin is passed down to all who are born according to the natural course. But the one who is born without the help of a man does not inherit the sin of

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Adam. He is conceived, not by a sinful man, but by the Holy Spirit. So he has a human nature. If anything, his nature is more human than ours is, because his sinless nature accords with God's original design. He is fully human, but without sin.

So the virgin conception teaches us these three things: First, that Jesus is special in a way that surpasses all who came before him. Second, he is the promised seed of the woman who will free us from Satan's tyranny. And third, he is without sin.

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He assumed human flesh like ours so that he can identify with us. And I don't mean that in the sense that he merely understands what we have to go through. I mean it in the sense that he can represent us. He becomes human so that he can hang in our place. As Adam represented us regarding sin, so Jesus represents us regarding righteousness. And the life he gives far surpasses the death that came from Adam (Rom. 5:12-21). Jesus came without sin so that he can take our sin as his own. When he came in human flesh as an embryo, he came without sin. By the time he yielded up his spirit on the cross, he did have sin. But it was not any sin he had committed. He came without sin so that he could take ours. When he dies for sin, he has no sins of his own to die for; he dies for ours. He assumed human flesh in order to heal it.

One of the early church fathers said it well. He said, "That which he has not assumed, he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved" (Gregory of Nazianzus). That is, Jesus took on the complete nature of man in order to heal the entire nature of man, both body and soul. And he assumed human flesh from the earliest stage. He could have come at any stage. The incarnation was already a miracle. It wouldn't have been any extra difficulty for the Christ to come as a thirty-year-old man. But he came as an embryo, because, one, embryos are human beings, and two, we are all conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). Death is a process that begins at conception, so Jesus began his redemptive work at conception. He started at the beginning in order to fulfill the Law from first to last.

This is the miracle of Christmas. It's not really the birth. The birth is when it became more visible to Joseph, Mary, and some random shepherds. But the miracle was his conception. That is where the Son of God took on human flesh in the smallest, humblest, and most vulnerable form. He grew, and lived, and suffered, just like every other human being before and after him, so that he might also die for every human being before and after him. So rejoice! God has come to us in human flesh to save us from sin and death. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.