

LUKE 1:26–38. (EHV)

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged in marriage to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." But she was greatly troubled by the statement and was wondering what kind of greeting this could be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, because you have found favor with God. Listen, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end." Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Listen, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age even though she was called barren, and this is her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible for God." Then Mary said, "See, I am the Lord's servant. May it happen to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

People like talking about getting into the Christmas spirit this time of year. They often talk about it as though it were some sort of almost magical occurrence. It's not a guarantee. It might be sparked by the sight of some beautiful Christmas decorations or a beautiful snowfall, an unexpected demonstration of generosity or an unexpected visit, a beautiful Christmas song heard on the radio or in a concert, or something like that. Once it happens, now the person has the Christmas spirit and is in the mood when Christmas arrives.

But we know that being in a good mood isn't really what the Christmas spirit is all about. The true Christmas spirit can only come from *the* Spirit working through God's word. And the account of the angel Gabriel announcing the birth of the Messiah to the virgin Mary is as good a portion of God's word as any to get us in the Christmas spirit and to prepare us to celebrate Christ's birth.

1.

It was six months after Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist that God sent the same angel that had announced John the Baptist's birth to a small town in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged in marriage but not yet married. Her name was Mary. The angel went to her, greeted her, and told her she was highly favored and blessed among women, and that the Lord was with her. It was such an effusive and over-the-top greeting—not to mention that it was from an angel—that Mary was actually troubled or perplexed at the greeting and wondered what this was all about. Gabriel went on to explain that she was going to conceive and give birth to a son. But it wasn't so much *that* she would give birth that was the focus of his announcement; it was *to whom* she would give birth.

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." This could also be translated, "will be called a son of the Most High." In Psalm 82, God uses the phrase "sons of the

Most High” to describe kings, rulers, and judges. So at this point, Gabriel is only telling Mary that her son is going to be great and powerful and be a ruler of some kind.

“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.” Now the angel begins to tell her just what kind of ruler he will be. He will be a king like David his ancestor. Because of the prophecy in 2 Samuel 7 we heard earlier, the promised Messiah became known as *the* son of David. Gabriel is telling Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah.

“He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end.” We also heard this in 2 Samuel 7, when the prophet Nathan told David that God would establish the throne of his son’s kingdom forever. Because of that specific detail, the Jews who were paying attention understood that the Messiah was not David’s son, Solomon, because his throne was not established forever. He reigned over Israel for forty years, and then he died. But Mary’s son would reign forever and his kingdom would never end. This not only suggests that he would not be an ordinary human, because ordinary humans cannot reign forever because ordinary humans do not live forever, but also that his kingdom would not be an ordinary kingdom, because no earthly kingdom lasts forever.

After Mary asked the angel how this would take place, Gabriel told her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon 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.” Now Gabriel is spelling out that this is not merely going to be a “son of the Most High” as in Psalm 82. This child isn’t going to be born after Mary and Joseph get married and consummate their marriage. This child is going to be conceived by the Holy Spirit. So he will not just be *a* son of the Most High, but *the* Son of the Most High. He will not be like David, who acknowledged that he was surely sinful from birth, sinful from the time his mother conceived him. No, this child will be holy from conception and birth.

Finally, the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah would be fulfilled! Now we can actually understand the very first prophecy, that the one who would crush the devil’s head would be the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), and not the seed of a man like every other human being. Here is the prophet like Moses, who would know God face to face and would be raised up from among the Israelites (Deut. 18:15). Here is the one whose greatness would reach to the ends of the earth and who would rule over the nations and who would be their peace (Micah 5:2–5). Here is the one who would tend his flock like a shepherd (Isa. 40:11). Here is the one who would put an end to sin, atone for wickedness, and bring in everlasting righteousness (Dan. 9:24). Here is the one who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, and yet would prolong his days (Isa. 53). And now we know how he will be equipped to do all of this—he will be 100% true human as the son of Mary and 100% true God as the Son of God conceived by the Holy Spirit.

This is the one whose birth we are about to celebrate.

When we hear and see who he is and what he came to do, how can we not be ready to celebrate?

2.

Well, one way we can not be ready to celebrate is if we don’t take God at his word. For what good is it for us that the One who is both David’s son and David’s Lord is going to be born of the virgin Mary if we don’t actually believe it? Pastor Strieter, the Lutheran pastor from the

1800s whose stories I like to share, told a story about a member he encountered in his congregation in Peru, Indiana. He had been told that this member didn't believe there was a devil, and it turned out there was a lot more he didn't believe. Pastor Strieter said that just between the two of them he once asked this member, "Do you honestly believe, sir, that Christ is God's Son?"

The man said, "I too am God's son."

Pastor Strieter asked, "What, sir, do you say to the words, 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'?"

The man replied, "That sounds to me exactly like if I went away on a trip to Germany and when I came back after a year, my wife was pregnant"—he actually put it more crudely, calling his wife his "old lady" and saying "fat" instead of "pregnant"—"and when I asked, 'Where'd you get that from?' and she said, 'From the Holy Spirit.'"

Pastor Strieter said, "So in your eyes, sir, Christ is the child of a whore?"

He said, "Yeah, what else could he be?" Pastor Strieter says they ultimately had to excommunicate that man.

More recently, I was made aware of a TikToker who posted, "Wondering why I can't get into the Christmas spirit, then I remember it's a birthday party of a character in a book that says I can't have reproductive rights." One of the many problems with this post is the fact that, to her, Christ is nothing more than "a character in a book." No wonder she's having problems getting into the Christmas spirit.

And we'll have problems, too, if we don't take God at his word. And actually, if we're looking for a good example to follow, there is perhaps none better in all of Scripture than Mary. First, listen to how she responds after the angel spells out why he's visiting her. He tells her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, because you have found favor with God. Listen, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end." After hearing that, how would a normal unmarried woman respond? First, if she believes that she will conceive and give birth to a son and she is already pledged to be married, she would probably assume that it's going to happen after her upcoming marriage, right? Not Mary. She simply assumes that if an angel of God is telling her this now, then God is going to act immediately and perform a miracle. I think of Numbers 23:19, and maybe Mary did too: "Does God speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" Or maybe it's that she already knew from carefully listening to God's word that the Messiah wouldn't just be *a* son of the Most High, but *the* Son of the Most High, and she knew that such a person could never come from a union between her and Joseph.

Second, after hearing that you're going to conceive and give birth to the Messiah and that he will rule forever and ever, wouldn't there be some stunned reaction along the lines of, "What? Are you kidding me? I can't believe this! This is too much to take in." Not Mary. She basically just says, "Could you tell me how this is going to happen, since I am a virgin who has not been with any man?"

And when the angel then spells it out in greater detail, saying that she will conceive by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and God's power, which really doesn't clear up what she is going to experience, and tells her explicitly that her son will be the Son of God, she simply

responds (I imagine her doing it with a some sort of bow), “See, I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.”

Think about how Moses responded when God told him at the burning bush that he would lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Excuse after excuse, followed finally by, “Send someone else, please” (Exod. 4:13). Not Mary. “See, I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.”

She believes every word of it, and if it is God’s will for her to go through all of this, then so be it. Martin Luther liked to describe reactions like this as closing our eyes and ears and all our senses in the world and opening them back up in the Word and clinging only to the Word.

What would our lives look like if we did that regularly? If we did that after reading or hearing another day’s worth of depressing social and political news? If we did that during a pandemic? If we did that after a bad diagnosis or a heavy financial blow? If we did that in the throes of guilt or death?

What would our lives look like if we did that with difficult teachings of the Bible—closed our eyes and ears and all our senses in the world and opened them back up in the Word and said, “See, I am the Lord’s servant. May things be as the Lord has said”? What would we see and how would we feel when witnessing a baptism? When receiving the Lord’s own body and blood in the Supper? How would we view unpopular practices like close Communion and church discipline? How much more easily would we talk to our unbelieving or straying friend or relative?

What would our lives look like if we did that while listening to the Scripture readings during Advent and then during Christmas? If we followed God’s word even more closely than the tracking information for the gifts we purchased? I daresay there would be enough Christmas spirit to go around for all of us and then some. We would be more than prepared to celebrate Christ’s birth.

Good thing to hear that Mary found favor with God, rather than that she had earned rewards from God. God’s grace and God’s word made Mary what she was, and God’s grace and God’s word can do the same for us. God’s grace and God’s word are what led Mary to say, “I am the Lord’s servant, not his master.” God’s grace and God’s word are what lead us to say the same: “I don’t tell God what he should say and do, what’s true and what’s false. He tells me what’s true and what’s false, what he does and what I should do.” God’s grace and God’s word are what led Mary to say, “God wants to bring his Son, the Messiah, into the world through me? So be it.” God’s grace and God’s word are what lead us to say, “God wants to pay for all my sins and forgive and save me and give me eternal life through the virgin Mary’s son? So be it. After all, nothing is impossible with God.”

With that God-given attitude, we are prepared to celebrate Christ’s birth. Amen.