

Luke 1:26-38
Gabriel's Message to Mary
by the Rev. Dr. Grover Gunn
at McDonald Presbyterian Church
Collins, Mississippi
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This coming Wednesday is Christmas Day, a day in which many throughout the world remember the birth of Jesus Christ. We don't really know if Jesus was born on December 25. We don't even know if Jesus was born in the month of December or during the winter. It doesn't really matter. If we needed to know the day of Jesus' birth, the Bible would have told us. What is really important is that we believe in Him as our Savior. And when our culture chooses to focus upon the birth of Jesus, we can join in the spirit of the season. And that is what we will do today.

As we seek to worship the Lord on this Lord's Day and in this Christmas season, I want to consider what the angel Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary about the conception of Jesus. This angelic message to the Virgin explains why the Virgin's Son was so very special. In our Scripture lesson for today, I read 13 verses in order to give you sufficient context, but I want to consider only one verse, verse 35:

35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

We will today consider this one verse under three headings: the Holy Spirit, the Holy Seed and the Holy Son.

First, the Holy Spirit. Mary had not known a man, and yet she is going to bear a Son. The angel tells her that this miracle will be accomplished through the work of God's Holy Spirit, who is the power of the Highest. The word translated "Spirit" in both Hebrew and Greek can also mean both breath and wind. The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who goes forth from the Father through the Son like a powerful wind to effect God's holy will within creation. God sent forth His Spirit to bring forth a living soul from the womb of the Virgin, even as God had breathed into the nostril's of Adam's cold body, and he became a living soul. God sent forth His Spirit upon the Virgin even as He had blown the breath of His divine wind upon Ezekiel's valley of dry bones in order to raise up a living army.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit also appears under the imagery of the dove. In our passage for today, we read that the Power of the Highest would overshadow the Virgin Mary. The Greek word here translated "overshadow" is also used in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to a bird hovering over its young:

Psalm 91:4
4 He shall cover you with His feathers, And under His wings you shall take refuge;
...

This same imagery is used in the Genesis account of creation. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and God's Spirit was hovering over the face of the waters. Moses used the Hebrew word here translated "hovering" in one other verse. In Deuteronomy 32:11, Moses used this word to refer to an eagle hovering over its young in their nest. At the beginning of creation, planet earth was a chaotic watery mass that was without form and void of life. The Holy Spirit was hovering over the unformed earth like a bird hovering over its nest while caring for its young. At the first creation, the Holy Spirit was performing His ministry of life as God spoke His word of creation and transformed the lifeless chaos into the teeming cosmos. This same Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin Mary, covered her, as it were, with His feathers, and performed His ministry of life. The Holy Spirit hovered over the dark void of the Virgin's womb and brought forth a new creation. The Holy Spirit, who is a pure divine spirit, effected the miracle of the biological conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, a miracle beyond our ability to comprehend.

Our first point was the Holy Spirit, and our second point is the Holy Seed. I am referring here to the Holy One whom the angel said would be born of Mary. The Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and then the Holy One would be born of her.

The old creation had been tainted by sin, and the human race passed on this pollution from generation to generation. Yet through this miraculous conception accomplished without the seed of a father, the Holy Spirit broke this iron chain of depravity extending back to the first Adam and enabled the conception of a Child free from this hereditary moral pollution. The Seed of the woman would be a holy Seed in the sense of sinless. The Holy Child would be of the race of Adam, like us in every way, yet without sin. In the womb of the Virgin Mary, even though she was a member of Adam's sinful race, even though she was a sinner herself, the Holy Spirit would bring forth a sinless Child.

Let me stop here to say something about the doctrine of the immaculate conception. As I have said, we believe that Jesus was born without sin. I could also express that by saying that we believe in the immaculate conception of Jesus. Jesus was conceived with a morally pure soul as opposed to a morally corrupt soul. We believe that, but we don't believe in the doctrine of the immaculate conception. That may sound confusing. We believe in the immaculate conception of Jesus, but we don't believe in the doctrine of the immaculate conception. That sounds confusing until you realize that the doctrine of the immaculate conception is not about Jesus. The doctrine of the immaculate conception is a Roman Catholic doctrine about Mary. The doctrine of the immaculate conception says that Mary was conceived with a morally pure soul. We do not believe that. We believe that Jesus is the only human being ever conceived with a morally pure soul. All other humans were conceived with the imputed guilt of Adam's first sin and the imparted corruption of Adam's fallen nature.

The teaching that Mary was born without sin is not taught in the Bible. In our text for today, the angel Gabriel addressed Mary with the words, "highly favored one." That is in verse 28 of today's scripture reading. That is the Roman church's only proof text for their doctrine of the immaculate conception. They are not getting their doctrine from this text; they are reading their doctrine into this text. The Greek word here translated "highly favored one" is used in one other place in the New Testament. It is used in Ephesians 1:6, and there it doesn't refer to someone

who was born without sin. It refers to sinners who were by nature children of wrath but who were saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Ephesians 1:6 says,

6 ... to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.

The Greek verb is used here in Ephesians in the indicative mood and is translated "has made accepted." The same Greek verb is used in Luke 1:28 as a passive participle, and it is there translated "highly favored." Those are the only two uses of this particular Greek word in the New Testament.

The Bible nowhere teaches the immaculate conception of Mary. Also, none of the early church fathers taught this doctrine. This doctrine was first introduced by the heretic Pelagius in the fifth century. This new teaching of Pelagius was soundly rejected at the time by his contemporary, St. Augustine of Hippo. Following the lead of St. Augustine, respected theologians rejected the doctrine of the immaculate conception through the centuries. Some who rejected it were St. Augustine, Pope Gregory the Great, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas. The Roman Church did not make the doctrine of the immaculate conception the official doctrine of the Roman Church until 1854. That is the year when Pope Pius IX officially proclaimed that a person has to believe that Mary was conceived without original sin in order to be saved.

That is my little aside on the Roman doctrine of the immaculate conception. We disagree with this relatively modern Roman doctrine and believe instead that only Jesus was conceived without original sin.

We have looked at the Holy Spirit and the Holy Seed. Our third and last point is the Holy Son. Jesus was holy in the sense of sinless, but He was also holy in an even more profound sense. He was holy in that He was fully divine while also possessing a full and complete human nature.

Our text talks about Jesus as the Son of God, but our text relates this only to the miraculous way in which Jesus was born. Our text says that the one to be born will be called the Son of God because God directly and miraculously caused His conception in the womb of a virgin. The text says that the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary, the power of the Most High will overshadow Mary, and therefore, for that reason, the Holy One who will be born shall be called the Son of God. This text teaches that one reason Jesus is called the Son of God is because God the Holy Spirit caused the miraculous conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

That is one reason why Jesus is called the Son of God, but there are also others. The most important reason why Jesus is called the Son of God is because He is the divine Son of God in human flesh. Jesus is called the Son of God because He is God Incarnate. The Incarnation is the most important sense in which Jesus is the Son of God, and the Incarnation also is the most profound sense in which Jesus is the Holy One of God. I have already discussed that Jesus is the Holy One of God in that He was sinless from conception. There is also a second sense in which Jesus is holy.

Holiness means to be set apart. God is holy in that He is set apart from all sin and thus morally pure. God is also holy in that He is set apart from all creation because He is God and thus eternal and uncreated and divine. We can never be holy in that sense, but Jesus was and is. Jesus was fully divine while also possessing a full and complete human nature. Jesus was the divine Son of God and also the human child of Mary.

To begin with, Jesus, the Virgin's Child, was fully human. God had formed the first Adam from the dust of the earth, but God formed the second Adam from the dust of the Virgin Mary. Some heretics have taught that the Virgin Mary was merely a human pipe through which God channeled a special heavenly body from heaven to earth, but this is not what happened. The Holy One who was born to her was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. The second Adam was the Seed of Woman, born without a human father but the biological child of His mother. As Mary's child, Jesus had a complete human nature. He had a human body and also a human soul. He thought with a human mind. He felt emotion with a human heart. He made decisions with a human will. He had a full and complete human nature. He came to heal the human sickness of sin, and to heal the whole of the sickness, He had to had to possess a whole human nature. He came to pay the human penalty for human sin. In order to pay the whole penalty, He had to suffer the penalty for sin with the complete set of human faculties. To suffer physically, He needed a human body. To suffer mentally, He needed a human mind. To suffer emotionally, He needed a human heart. To suffer voluntarily, He needed a human will.

Jesus had a complete and sinless human nature. Yet Jesus was also a divine Person. He was God the Son made flesh. That is what really sets Jesus apart.

Bear with me now because I am going to try to express what borders on the inexpressible. I am going to try to discuss a deep truth which the Bible does reveal, but that revelation is only a glimpse of divine realities beyond our ability to understand in any detail. Bear with me now as I discuss the incarnation and the trinity.

John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh." "The Word" is another name for God the Son, the divine Son of God. The text doesn't say that the Word became a human person. At the incarnation, the Word did not become a person because the Word was already a person and had been from eternity past. The Word became flesh, the word "flesh" here referring not merely to the human physical body but to a complete human nature.

The Word became flesh, but the Word was already a person. When we think of the word "person," we tend to think of a complete individual. I am not using the word in that way. I am using the word "person" to refer to the most basic root of a human's personal existence. I am talking about a human individual's most ultimate identity, the part of him that is rightfully responsible for all that he decides and does and says and thinks. When a person thinks a thought, does God hold that person's brain accountable? When a person makes a decision, does God hold that person's will accountable? When a person says a word, does God hold that person's tongue accountable? No, God holds that person accountable. Everyone has an identity more basic than his body and soul which God holds accountable.

God the Son has been a person in this sense from eternity past. From eternity past, God the Son has been exercising His personhood through the one divine nature. So have God the Father and God the Spirit. As distinct persons, they love one another and communicate with one another. As one God, they all think with the one divine mind, feel with the one divine heart and will with the one divine will. God the Son has always done this and God the Son continues to do this, but at a point in time, God the Son also began to exercise His personhood through a complete human nature. That began at the moment of the miraculous conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This is the miracle of the incarnation. Without ceasing to exist as God, God the Son began also to exist as a human. Without ceasing to experience a divine life through the divine nature, God the Son began to experience a human life through His newly created human nature. The Holy One who was born of the Virgin Mary was holy not only in the sense of being sinless but also in the sense of being divine.

It boggles the mind! The unborn Child created in the womb of the Virgin Mary was the Creator God whom the heavens cannot contain. The little Babe in the Manger, so weak and dependent, was the all powerful Sovereign of the universe. The young Man, who grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and men, was the all knowing God from whom no secret can be hidden. The adult Jesus, who experienced weariness, thirst, hunger and sleepiness, was the all sufficient Lord of the universe. And for our sakes, He humbled Himself further and experienced the painful and shameful death of the cross.

Why was Jesus born? Why did the Word become flesh? Why did the Son of God become the Son of Man and the Child of Mary? He did so to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He came to make us right with God. To do that, He had to become one of us in the sense of being fully human. He had to live a perfectly sinless life. He had to die an undeserved death. He did all these things to make us right with God.

In order to take advantage of Jesus saving work, we have to be in a saving union with Jesus. The Holy Spirit as an act of undeserved grace puts us into that saving union with Jesus. We experience that saving union as saving faith. By convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, the Holy Spirit persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ in faith as He is freely offered in the gospel.

Over time, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith in Christ. The stronger our faith in Christ, the more we experience His saving power that enables us to die to sin and to live to righteousness. In order to strengthen our faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit uses outward means such as the preaching of the Word, communion with God in prayer and the Lord's Supper. As we partake of this bread and wine and become one with them physically, we are reminded that we are also in a special spiritual union with the body and blood of Jesus with all His saving benefits. We are reminded that just as surely as this bread and wine nourishes and refreshes our physical body, our union with Jesus nourishes and refreshes our souls. When we partake in faith, the Holy Spirit uses these reminders to strengthen that faith.

On the doctrine of the immaculate conception, see "DID I REALLY LEAVE THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH? The Journey into Evangelical Faith and Church Experience" by William Webster at <http://www.christiantruth.com/articles/Testimony/>

Suggested Call to Worship

NKJ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Matthew 2:1-2

Suggested Benediction

NKJ Lord, now ... [let Your servants] depart in peace ...; For [our] eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. Amen.

Luke 2:29-30

Suggested Offertory Statement and Prayer

NKJ And when (the wise men) had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

Heavenly Father, we thank You that we now have an opportunity to follow the example of the wise men from the East who long ago worshiped Christ with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Even as You sent Your wondrous star to guide the wise men, shine the light of Your Spirit in our hearts today and bring us to Christ through faith that we may present our gifts before Him as a sincere act of worship. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Suggested Invocation

O Heavenly Father, we praise You today for sending into the world, as our Redeemer, the Seed of Woman, miraculously born of a Virgin. For He bruised the head of the serpent and delivered us from Satan's tyranny through His perfect life, His finished sacrifice and His victorious resurrection from the dead. We praise You for the gift of Your incarnate Son.

We also confess our sins, for we have often failed to live as those whom You have made to be to Yourself a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Forgive us, O Lord, through the saving work of Jesus, who came to save His people from their sins.

And now, O Lord, even as You sent Your Holy Spirit upon the Virgin Mary to effect the miraculous conception of Jesus, so send Your Holy Spirit upon us today to work with both Word and Sacrament to strengthen and confirm our faith in Jesus and thus increase our communion with Him and His saving power and conform us more completely to His holy image.