

The Birth of Jesus **Luke 1:26 – 56, 2:1 – 40**

As we all know, the birth of Jesus involved several spectacular miracles including, of course, the conception of Jesus, plus angels, a strange star, a chorus of angels in the sky, several prophets, and an unborn baby that knew who the other unborn baby was in the room. But, this morning, we will be looking at this series of events from the viewpoint of the nature of Biblical faith and how the quality of our faith dictates what we can accomplish in the service of God.

We will just be looking into the Luke account, which lacks any mention of the wise men or their star or the killing of the babies in Bethlehem, or the escape of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt to avoid the murderous intentions of King Herod. All of those facets of the story are in Matthew, but not Luke.

Also the translators have done us the disservice of using the same English word, blessed, for two entirely different Greek words. So, I will be inserting the two definitions, “above the cares of this life” and “say good things about,”

So, let’s begin with the faith of Mary and what that can teach us about our faith, starting at Luke 1:26 – 38.

Now in the sixth month [the sixth month since Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist became pregnant in her old age, as stated in verse 36] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you [God has been saying good things about you] among women!” But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” 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. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Put yourself in Mary’s place. She is a young woman, probably early teens, who just talked to an angel. She does not bring up the social implications or the impact on Joseph. While she is curious how this might happen physically, she accepts the unsought role without objection. The text does not describe what else might have been going through her mind. But, we should remember what happened to Zacharias in the previous paragraph. He doubted Gabriel, this same angel who announced to him the miraculous conception of his son and was mute for the whole pregnancy. Mary’s faith was truly remarkable.

Comparing our faith to Mary’s might seem a bit much. After all, we are not recipients of medical marvels that will change the course of human history. But then, perhaps we are. God

has made hundreds of outrageous promises to the faithful, all recorded in the New Testament. Each of them is humanly impossible. Perhaps the biggest difference, from our point of view, is that those promises mostly have to do with character development, not suspension of the basic tenets of biology. But, being transformed into the character of Jesus is every bit as remarkable as what happened to Mary. The difference is that ours is not physical and temporary, but non-physical and eternal. So, we need not marvel at Mary so much as emulate her. God promised her something; she accepted it graciously and set out to follow that miracle wherever it led. We have the same choice. We need to know what those promises are and set about doing the humanly impossible.

Moving along to the next scene in this story, Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, perhaps because Elizabeth might just be the only person in Mary's life who would understand. They both illustrate a key component of godly faith: It's not about me.

Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you [God says good things about you] among women, and blessed is [God says good things about] the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed [above the cares of this life] is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed [one about whom God has said good things]. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.

Before we get to the nature of Mary's faith, an important thing to notice is that God arranged for Mary to be comforted and encouraged. This is not unlike the time in Corinth recorded in Acts 18:9 – 10, when Paul was afraid for his life and God spoke to him and assured him that everything would be OK. Or 2 Corinthians 1 when Paul described how godly comforting works, both directly from God and indirectly through fellow faithful. The faith of each of us is part of a bigger picture. It is not "me against the world." Notice that Elizabeth referred to Mary as "the mother of my Lord." Mary was less than a month along. Maybe Mary had not even told Joseph yet. But Elizabeth knew. That knowledge in itself was a miracle.

Concerning Mary's faith, notice that she, and Elizabeth, were focused on the joy of serving in this bigger picture, rather than being cowed or frightened by the obvious future repercussions.

First, most good, church-going people do not see their roles in the kingdom as that big or important, or integral to its success. Further, they do not expect much teamwork. And, most people see potential repercussions as a bad thing, something to be avoided. Toward the end of

the next chapter, Mary is assured by a prophet that her own heart will be pierced through as a result of this baby.

Do we focus on the joy of serving the kingdom, or the potential difficulties? Suffering as a result of faith is a given (as in 2 Timothy 3:12, "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"). But God set up the system for joy. Which result we experience, suffering or joy, is just a matter of how we choose to look at it.

Second, Mary spoke about the nature of God in verses 50 – 55, not about her role or the results. All too often, Christianity is communicated in terms of what is in it for me. But approaching people with a self-centered message makes it all but impossible to cause that radical reorientation to selflessness required for Biblical faith. For example, a common definition of grace given in an untold number of sermons is "unmerited favor." That is all about what is in it for me. The real definition of grace is "the collection of godly character traits with emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent." It's about the nature of God, not the benefit to me. Mary had that kind of faith, to which we should aspire.

In the next scene, Jesus is born. Of course, we tend to focus on the coming of the Messiah and the plan of God to save us from ourselves. But, this morning, let's look at the nature of faith displayed here. Picking up at Luke 2:1 –

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with Child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The nature of faith does not jump out at you in this paragraph. But notice how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, the town specified by Micah as the place from which the Messiah would come. If you check the parallel account in Matthew, that prophecy was how Herod's advisors were able to tell him and the wise men where to find this promised new king. But, Joseph was a carpenter who lived in Nazareth, about 70 miles north (except there were no roads that went strait, so probably close to 100 miles by the time they got there). And, after this part of the story was completed, they went back there. God wanted to use Joseph and Mary as the parents of the Messiah, but they were in the wrong place. Since God had declared to Mary, and as had been announced by Elizabeth, Mary was to be the mother of that promised Messiah. God certainly knew that this was a potential problem, since God is the one who, 700 years earlier, had specified the birthplace of the Messiah. I do not think it is a stretch to assume that God engineered this tax so that Joseph and Mary would be in the right place at the right time. So, what does this have to do with the nature of faith? When God promises something, and we take up that promise to act on it, but we see some problem areas that are out of our control, we need to trust God that He has the details covered. And, notice that God did not need to use such a socially disruptive method. Everyone in the whole country had to go to their ancestral towns. God could have arranged for the local Levite in Nazareth to preach on Micah so that Joseph would pick up on the fact that he was in the wrong place. Or, maybe God tried that and Joseph

had not taken the broad hint. However God engineered it, our faith needs to include that confidence that God will work out the parts that we cannot or do not.

Secondly, notice that no relatives took them in. Mary and Joseph were going to their ancestral town, Bethlehem. Since everyone else had to do the same, the only people left in town were their relatives, either permanent residents or fellow temporary refugees. Israel was known as a hospitable place, by Law. So, the faithful at least, were accustomed to taking in extra people. And Mary, being at full term, was in obvious need of accommodations. What does this suggest to us about the nature of faith? (1) The process probably won't be comfortable. (2) Others will let you down. (3) Moving ahead with the promise will come out as needed, although probably not in the manner in which we thought it would or should.

Moving along to the fourth example of the nature of Biblical faith, we have the shepherds, beginning in Luke 2:8 –

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

God hired a lower-tier public relations firm to handle the advance advertising. Certainly, we have the wise men in the Matthew account, but they did not go around telling everyone, and they were not Israelites. Zechariah predicted, in his chapter 11, some 500 years earlier, that, when the Messiah came, the poor would recognize the event, whereas the wealthy would not. Throughout the Bible, faith generally has taken its route through the ordinary people, not the famous or the powerful. Of course, this seems backwards to us. Manufacturers pay sports figures huge amounts of money to represent their products. We expect leaders to be charismatic and well off. God used shepherds, the bottom of the trades, to make the event known. Sometimes our faith fails to get in gear because we are looking for a business-worthy pathway, when word-of-mouth through the poor has worked a lot better.

Further, these shepherds saw the chorus of angels in the sky, and they got up and went. The story did not end with them remarking on how inspiring the music was. Biblical faith results in action, not just reflection.

And, these shepherds told everyone. Perhaps we could make them different than we are by focusing on the spectacular method through which they were told of the birth of the Messiah. But, really, our own faith should include events worth repeating. The Bible is full of

descriptions of events that wowed everyone. Of course, we need to be careful that we are not attributing to God events upon which He has not put His stamp. We should not tell everyone that the world is going to end a week from Thursday, or that God raised someone from the dead who really just had extensive but successful surgery. God has always staged His events in such a way that there was just no other explanation. And if we have not seen any, we should be asking ourselves why.

And, finally, our fifth example of the nature of faith, the events surrounding Jesus' circumcision and dedication, starting with Luke 2:21 –

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") [which is found in Exodus 13:2 – 13, which goes on to say the each first-born male shall be redeemed] and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." [The rules for that are found in Leviticus 12:2 – 8] And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child, Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel." And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them [said good things about them], and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

Despite being obviously special, Joseph and Mary followed all the practices of the Law. How could Mary be considered unclean after delivering the Savior of the world? How could the firstborn be any more dedicated to the things of God? How could the Redeemer be redeemed? All those things were prescribed for all the other baby boys.

Exercising faith does not make us the exception, but rather makes following the rules all that much more important. Even in the first century, there were those who had been granted by God to learn miraculously new languages, or to reveal a new piece of the gospel, who then felt themselves special (1 Corinthians 12 and 14), so they took over assemblies with their desire to show off. Mary and Joseph were not that way.

And, of course, in this scene we see how God planned for this event long in advance by placing Simeon and Anna in just the right place so that Mary and Joseph could be encouraged, reassured, and prepared. And, joyous anticipation began, even though the fruition was still a generation away. And this was the second time in 16 months that the populace heard these amazing claims about that promised Messiah.

Those of faith should be like that: comforting, reassuring, building anticipation. We are those who are instrumental in making the impossible happen as we remember the nature of God. We look forward to the joyous possibilities rather than the probable difficulties. And, as we act on our faith, we trust that God will bring together the efforts of many, the vast majority of whom we have never met, to accomplish that which only God could pull off.