

Luke 1:26-56
(Ezekiel 36:25-27; Romans 8:5-11)
“The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You”

Introduction

Every year, the sheer busyness of the holiday season – its frenetic shopping, innumerable parties and interminable meals – threatens to bury the very reason that Christian people once stopped and reflected upon God’s immeasurable love in Christ Jesus. How much time have you spent these past few weeks shopping for Christmas presents? How much time have you spent at holiday dinners and parties? How much time have you spent alone in a quiet place, reflecting on the extent to which God was willing to go in order to save us from our brokenness and guilt and to give us a new beginning as his dearly loved children? Hence, the reason for Advent: this is meant to be time of reflection, a time of reorienting one’s self to what is real and lasting in the midst of a culture bent on entertaining itself to death.

The meaning of this season is, of course, that a child was born – on a particular day, in a particular place, to a particular woman – a child utterly unique in this world’s story, a child so unique that his birth divides all history into two parts, those events leading up to his birth and those that follow. Every other child ever born, including you and me, is part of this world’s problem. This child alone is God’s solution to our problem.

But here is the key: What God has done for us will not help us unless the one born to Mary is also born in us. Jesus came to show us who God is, but that alone cannot save us; he came to show us who we were meant to be, but that alone cannot save us; he came to leave us an example that we should follow, but that alone cannot save us. Only if he is born in us can we be saved from our bondage to sin and shame and be set free to live as God created us to live.

How can such a thing be? How can this be more than pious talk? How can I encounter a God who is not safely caged within the pages of a book, but who breaks out in human history, scattering the proud and toppling rulers from their thrones, while lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things? How can I know his power in my life? The answer is found in the verses we have read.

Body

1. Our first challenge is to listen to God’s messenger (1:26-37).

Consider Mary’s situation: She is approached by a messenger from the very presence of God, who says, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” What is Mary’s response? She is “greatly troubled at the saying.” But the messenger continues, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Then these

staggering words, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. 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.” In other words, you will give birth to the Messiah. Mary asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin.” Note that she does not ask the same question as Zechariah asked. His question was essentially, “How am I to believe this when I and my wife are too old to have children?” Mary’s question is simply, “How will this happen, since I am a virgin?”

Now the most terrifying part of the message: “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.” Put yourself in Mary’s place and consider the burden that was laid upon this young woman. Any report she gives of this conversation exposes her to charges of immorality and blasphemy: she is pregnant out of wedlock, and naming God as the baby’s father!

Often God’s favor does not come as we might wish or desire. It comes as what seems to be the greatest trial we have ever faced. A crisis, an illness, the death of someone dearly loved, the loss of a job. It may be God calling us to something we would rather not do. If we spend time each day in his Word, reading the Scriptures and meditating on them, we will find ourselves constantly challenged as God’s Spirit applies God’s Word to our lives, convicting us of sin, calling us to turn from self-love to love of God and of others, as God calls us to stop clinging to our hopes and dreams and to give ourselves up for the sake of others.

The question is whether we have even begun to enter that conversation with the living God. May I ask you, have you opened yourself up to hear him in the places and through the means he would use to get your attention this Advent season, and challenge you to a new beginning, to a renovation of life?

2. Our second challenge is to receive God’s message (1:38).

Here is Mary’s glory, which shows her to be one of the greatest people ever born. Unlike Moses who said, “Here I am, send Aaron.” Unlike the many prophets who tried to escape God’s call when they knew that it would bring misunderstanding and pain, this incredibly brave young woman says, “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” We Protestants have over-reacted to worship of Mary by failing to revere her as the mother of our Savior, and as one of the supreme models of faith. She is given to us for veneration and imitation.

The sin of our first parents, the meaning of the Bible’s first story, is that human history ran amok, and each of our lives continues to run amok, when we stand in judgment on God’s Word. Whenever we say in response to the Scriptures, “I don’t think God would really say that to me,” or, “I don’t choose to do that,” we chose once again to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, rather than the tree of life. It makes no sense to say that we believe in the Lord if we are not willing to believe

that his ways are best, that his wisdom is greater than ours, and that disobedience leads to death.

Do you believe in the Lord? Then do you desire to obey his Word because you know that it leads to life? Or do you see it as cramping your style and holding you back from life? Mary had it right. In the face of such an overwhelming call, she responded, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

3. Our third challenge is to confirm God's message (1:39-45).

The messenger tells her something incredible about her cousin, Elizabeth, and Mary hurries to check it out. She wants to see whether others have experienced the faithfulness of God, whether the messenger is trustworthy. She discovers that God is up to much more than she had dreamed: He is fulfilling his promise to his people and demonstrating his power in two births, the one to a woman "too old" the other "too young," the one barren the other a virgin, through the one will be given the forerunner, through the other the Savior.

So we, too, must learn to confirm the message we receive by talking to others: to those whose lives are also being unsettled by God's call; to those farther along in the path of obedience; to those who are looking and longing for God's salvation. Mary's song shows that she has been studying the Scriptures, especially those texts that relate to the promised redeemer. She is seeking the confirmation of the written Word of God and the confirmation of those like her cousin Elizabeth whom she respects as wise and godly. So ought we to live in this dialogue with God's Word and with God's people.

4. Our fourth challenge is to declare God's message (1:46-55).

Mary's great song of praise to God is also a bold declaration of God's promises to her in the light of his Word. Mary is telling her story of grace, and celebrating it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were all so full of wonder at God's claim on us, so overwhelmed by his gracious gospel promises, and so certain of the transforming effect of that good news, that we found ourselves filled to overflowing with songs of praise to God that told our story and gave him the glory? How different this world's songs are from Mary's. Each generation's version of "I Did It My Way" contrasts starkly with "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." This should be the great song that describes and defines each one of our lives.

5. Our final challenge is to en flesh God's message.

Don't miss the point of all this: God has come to earth and taken on human flesh through this young woman's obedient response to his promise. And that is what he wants to do through each of us. For this we were created and for this we were redeemed, that he might walk the earth and have dominion over all that is his through us, his children whom he loves with an everlasting love and in whom he

lives by his Spirit. Our lives are to be living testimonies of the truth of the gospel message. Everything we say and do should encourage people to believe and receive the gospel.

We make it all so complicated, but it is as simple as love. As the most familiar and best-loved Bible verse says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). He is still saving the world and intends to do it through the likes of us!

Conclusion

So God fulfills his promise to Mary, but not as she had envisioned: not on satin sheets in a king’s palace, not even at home with her family attending, but in a stable with animals looking on. So, too, for us: The trouble with God’s favor is that he doesn’t always act as we wish or desire, even when he answers our prayers. He breaks our hard hearts to create the opening through which he will enter and make all things new. All that he asks, all that we can give, is the open heart of Mary, “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

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