

Gabriel's Message

Luke 1:26-38

INTRODUCTION

Last week, while driving my van filled with 4 kids along a desolate toll road in south-eastern Oklahoma, Christie and I had a brief moment to ourselves. You see, our children were sleeping! Normally we just sit and savor the no screaming. Instead, Christie began to tell me about an encounter her mother experienced the week before:

A gigantic enameled picture frame had come into my mother-in-law's possession. So of course she wanted to have it customized to fit a slightly smaller painting she had of the Turkish coast. As it turns out, finding a craftsman who can and will do this is next to impossible. But she eventually found a random carpenter operating out of his garage in Taylor who agreed to give it a try. As she pulls up to his house he introduces himself and his name is Daniel. Naturally, she and Daniel immediately hit it off because Daniel is also the name of her grandson. They are in the zone. Then, Daniel begins talking about his kids and reveals that their names are David and Joseph. She comments that they are both biblical names. He shrugs, says that he guesses so and that it was his wife's idea. There is a pause, and Daniel admits that the bible really isn't for him anymore. My mother-in-law then asks this man whom she met all of 15 minutes ago why the bible wasn't for him anymore, thinking he is about to launch into some sticky theological problem. But he surprised her; he said the reason he didn't believe was that he doesn't see miracles in our world. You see, he was raised in the church and believed in miracles. When he grew up, he began to doubt that miracles were possible because he didn't see them in his life. As a result, he says, church and God probably aren't real either. Daniel lost his faith because he stopped believing miracles possible.

Quite possibly the biggest miracle in the bible is the virgin birth. A young teenage girl 2000 years ago was able to conceive as a virgin the incarnated Son of God? Do we really expect a modern man, with the benefits of scientific understanding and biology, to believe this? While it may be shocking to our ears, imagine with me how infinitely more shocking it must have been to Mary's. She has never known a man much less considered the implication of carrying God's son. If we are honest, we would expect her to have some major issues with this announcement. In Mary, though, we have an incredible example of belief despite the claim. How does Mary believe the unbelievable?

I think it was more than blind faith. Mary's belief is resting on 3 pillars. The first is Favor, which means she believes who God says she is. The second is Gospel, meaning she believes in the calling God has given her. And third pillar is Power; she has faith in how God is able to accomplish that calling.

Favor, Gospel and Power.

FAVOR

We are introduced to a young Jewish girl named Mary. Her only distinction up to this point is that she is a virgin and betrothed to a man named Joseph who is a descendent of David. Into this ordinary scene walks an angel. Not any angel, mind you, but Gabriel who stands in God's presence and

was sent by God with a message just for Mary. I can imagine that she must have been astounded; not only was a stranger standing in her home, this stranger was an angel! He gets right to it, as it were, by saying "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" What is her reaction to all of this? What would be your reaction? Luke says she is greatly troubled and was desperately trying to figure out what was the meaning of Gabriel's greeting. I find this fascinating: It doesn't say that she is terrified, which is the usual reaction to an angel. She isn't in shock but instead she is trying to figure out what is going on. Why is Mary troubled?

I think she, like us, has a tough time with being called favored. We don't feel very favored most of the time. She isn't rich or famous or powerful. She is poor and totally anonymous. Yet, favored she is. How? I think it is because we have favor all wrong. Is favored earned or unearned?

Favor, to me, means that someone likes me. Approves of me or what I am doing. There is something about me that has now earned their favor. So, it is only natural to expect that Gabriel is meaning this very thing by calling Mary "Oh favored one". He must mean, "Mary, because you have been such a good person you are now favored." While you could be forgiven for thinking this is the case, you would also be mistaken about what favor means when God is telling you that you have it. God's favor has nothing to do with what we possess and earn, but rather it has everything to do with what He gives us freely. Mary is favored because she is the recipient of God's grace. And God's grace, like favor, is not earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph 2:8-9) This really is unnatural for us. When encountering favor, we usually run the numbers to decide if we deserved it or not. But it is not about deserving; it is about receiving.

God's favor isn't always what we think it is either: sometimes suffering accompanies it. Mary doesn't know it yet, but suffering is heading her way. A lot. With Gabriel's next breath he will be telling her that God's call on her life is that she will conceive a son, not with Joseph, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. This will risk all of what little she possesses. It risks her relationship with Joseph, as he will naturally suspect that her pregnancy is not from God. It risks her very life in her culture there were grave consequences for having a child out of wedlock. At the very least, she will live with the stain of the suspected indiscretion for the rest of her days.

Has there been a time for you when God's call on your life feels more like suffering rather than favor? We think God's favor must mean blessings: a nice bank account, healthy children, a comfortable home. But what if God's plan for you is to not have children despite your desire for them? Does missing out on a career and the stability it can bring to your family mean that you don't have favor? No it does not. But what then is the point of favor? Mary was called favored and still suffered.

When God bestows his Favor he also bestows his Presence. It means we are not alone. The Lord that walks with us every step of the way. Mary is told she is favored AND that the Lord is with her. The Lord is with her? What does that even mean? Sometimes he places us in a situation that will look impossible to the world so that when he moves in a miraculous way it brings himself glory! Other times he raises us up with success so that he brings himself glory! It is not about whether we suffer or whether we are blessed. The Lord is with us, and that is the real FAVOR my friends! That favor is given as a grace and cannot be earned. Mary is favored not because she has earned it. Her favor is not at risk due to circumstances, whether good or bad. Her favor is upheld and sustained by the simple fact that the Lord is with her. And the Lord is with you this morning.

Believing *who* God tells us we are in Him is believing you are favored. Do you believe Him?

GOSPEL – Believing *what* God is calling us to

“And 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 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 to 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.’”

I honestly have a hard time imagining what Mary must be going through here. Just after coming to grips with the fact that there is an angel in her home, trying to discern what in the world being favored is all about, the rug is pulled out from under her with the news she will conceive. She was probably thinking, “OK, I am favored, and I shouldn’t be afraid because the Lord is with me, wait... what???”

God is calling Mary to serve as the mother of his only Son. Let that sink in. Her calling was to help inaugurate the Gospel for the world. Let’s look at what her call resulted in:

The central miracle of the Incarnation is that God became man. Jesus, who stood outside of time, is being immersed into time and space. Here is the “Word” through whom all of creation came into being now depending on Mary’s womb for nourishment. Paul describes the magnitude of this moment in Philippians 2:6-7, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” When we remember that Favor is that “the Lord is with us”, it takes on a whole new meaning when we realize what it cost Him. He literally becomes man! Here we do not have God, in all his splendor and glory, just coming along beside us. No, Jesus limits the very attributes that define him as God so that he can become man and truly “be with us”. What favor! What love!

It is important to remember that just because Jesus became man, it does not mean that he stopped being God. Quite the opposite. Jesus became fully man AND remains fully God. Notice he is not given the earthly promise first and then the divine. No, Gabriel first describes Jesus in divine terms (Son of the Most High) followed by human terms (given the throne of his father David). Why is this important? For the Jewish people hearing this message 2000 years ago, the promised Messiah was fervently prayed for to re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel. They were desperate because they were in the iron grip of Imperial Rome. The Messiah was thought to be a warrior-king who will save the Jews from Caesar in the here and now. To their shock, though, Jesus is not planning to simply save the Jews. He will save Romans, Greeks, pagans...everyone. The secular is dwarfed by the divine. His kingdom is not just an earthly kingdom that must vanquish the Romans and relieve the suffering of the Jews. His kingdom is universal and has the express intention of bringing all of creation back into relationship with God.

To be called to participate in the Incarnation is staggering. Mary was just told she will conceive and bear the Son of God. Naturally, she has questions.

“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’”

Notice she did not say, “This is impossible since I am a virgin”, or “I find this hard to believe.” No, she believes it will occur, and her question about how is rooted in that belief. Aren’t you delighted by the fact that Gabriel doesn’t rebuke her for asking questions? Our God is big enough to handle our questions. Are we courageous enough to ask God to help us understand his will? Mary has faith that is

anything but blind. She asks the angel to describe how this amazing miracle will occur. Have we ever thought to ask God how he will accomplish a call on our life?

Mary believes who God says she is in Him.

She believes what God has called her to.

Now she is about to discover to her joy *how* God will accomplish the call in her life.

POWER – Believing HOW God accomplishes his will

All of us have experienced the loss of electricity in our home. You are left to pulling out a candle and reading a book. There's not much else you can do! In the same way we as Christians are expected to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit in every way; if it were gone we wouldn't really know what to do!

"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.'"

The picture being painted by Gabriel here is a beautiful one; the power of God is transforming Mary's womb into the "Holy of Holies". God's holiness is 'settling' on her and bringing about his kingdom. The word translated "overshadowed" is 'episkiazo', which is the same word used to describe the cloud that settled on the tabernacle when the tent was filled with the glory of God. This cloud is the holy, powerful presence of God which is the Holy Spirit. Mary's body has become a home to God.

I have some great news: your body is a home to God as well. 1 Cor 6:19-20 says that "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?" Friends, the same Holy Spirit that settled upon Mary with the power of the Most High is the same Spirit that is within us right now. The SAME one. In fact, he doesn't merely overshadow us; he enters into us. Do we really believe that? If we did, it would change our whole day: we would pray continually to that same Spirit to lead us. We would be casting our worries on Him daily because we would trust that He can do something about it. Or, it may be that we don't have a problem with belief in the Spirit at all. Maybe our problem is that we find it hard to step aside and hand the direction of our day and our life over to the Spirit. We like to be in charge. We certainly don't like being overshadowed. What are we afraid of? Church, listen and know that the idea that we are able to control our lives and thrive is a lie.

A common misperception is that an alcoholic usually doesn't want to quit. Let me assure you, almost every one of them desperately wants to stop. Tragically, most of them cannot because they mistakenly think they are in control. In fact, they are completely out of control. The first step of the 12-step program is: I admit that I am powerless over alcohol – that my life has become unmanageable. The person struggling with alcohol cannot even begin to recover until they come to grips with the fact that they are not in control.

Giving up control is not easy. The very idea of being overshadowed is unpleasant for us. I cannot think of a single example of overshadowing being considered a good thing by our culture. We are uncomfortable with what it implies; a loss of individuality and uniqueness. Does it make you uncomfortable to see that Mary is being "overshadowed" by the Most High? I wonder if we value our own individuality and rights more than bringing about God's will in our lives. God, when he calls us to obey him, demands that He be in control of our lives and not us. Only then will His power manifest in us.

It is tempting to think that we can do the Lord's work for him, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. I mean, as long as we live good lives and reflect the values in the Bible we will make the world a better place, right? Well, the only problem with that approach is that it is completely human. This is the definition of religion. It is both impotent and wearisome. Jesus says that his burden is easy and his yoke is light. It is easy and light because you don't have to carry it alone. The Holy Spirit accomplishes the work of God.

Much like Mary must submit her body to the Holy Spirit to help bring about God's kingdom, we too must surrender our life to God. Not most of it. Not 99% of it. All of it. Surrender control over your free time. Surrender control over your money. Surrender control over your life. It is a daily challenge; and you won't be perfect. He is good. He can be trusted with your life, money and happiness. Jesus has "skin in the game"; He sacrificed everything for you already. At first blush this sounds extreme. It is. But what is more extreme is thinking your control is better than God's control. Your wisdom, better than His wisdom, your guidance better than his guidance.

What's next is the truly awesome part; once the Spirit is in control, just hang on.

" 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. For nothing will be impossible with God."

I believe that there is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit in more places than we think. Evidence is used to strengthen a claim. The evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit that Gabriel presents to Mary is Elizabeth's pregnancy. She is Mary's cousin who was unable to have children due to her age and the fact she was infertile her entire life. Unexpectedly she becomes pregnant! I think this is how miracles work. Taken alone, a woman getting pregnant is not necessarily a miracle. But the cousin of Mary, who is beyond child bearing years, who never had a child because she was barren, and has nonetheless prayed for a child is a miracle. It is not a coincidence. It is the power of the Spirit in action.

What evidences of the power of the Holy Spirit have you seen? Do we accept them as such? Or do we just shrug our shoulders and miss the miracle?

Let me tell you a quick story in my own life about this. A couple of years ago I was praying that God would open up a door for me to start a clinic. I had not mentioned this to anyone other than Christie. A week after I had begun praying about this, a doctor whom I have never met cornered me in the hospital dining room and asked if I was interested in taking over his practice. I'm not kidding. I was just trying to figure out who he was! Even more incredible is that a few months later I was just getting started at the clinic and he would introduce me to various patients as they showed up. Now, he is not a believer so when he noticed I was wearing a cross on my jacket to hold my ID card he asked me if I wouldn't mind removing it because it may make the patients uncomfortable. This was an awkward moment; on one hand I knew that God brought me to this clinic, but on the other the man who was giving it to me wanted me to take the cross off! I respectfully said I would keep it on. Moments later he introduced me to the next patient who happened to work at UT. I mentioned that a person in my city group worked there and if he knew her. He did and asked if I was a Christian and I said yes, and he began to talk about Jesus right there in front of the both of us!

Don't rationalize a miracle by assuming it is coincidence. We serve a big God. If you only remember one thing this week, make it this: for nothing will be impossible with the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Mary's belief is not blind. She knows who she is in the Lord. She knows the call that He has given her. And she is convinced of the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish it. Her response to Gabriel is not resigned or anxious; rather it is peaceful. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word."

Our faith today also does not need to be blind. We know the same things about God that Mary did on that day long ago. Furthermore, we have witnessed the fulfillment of her call; the Son of God Jesus, Emmanuel. God with us.

You are favored, will you believe it? You have a call from God, will you seek it? You have the Holy Spirit inside you, will you trust Him?