

The Annunciation

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[0 : 00] Welcome. It's wonderful to have you here. Particularly wonderful if you are a guest with us. I'm just, I'm delighted you've come. I hope you find the service comforting and encouraging and informative and all of that good stuff.

We are in the middle of a short series, Advent series, but we're going to take a break from that tonight so that we might look at some of the verses that we've been hearing about this evening. The story of Jesus' birth. Now the particular part of the reading I want to look at is Luke 1, 26, 38. We might be able to pop it up on the screen here. We had it up just shortly ago. It's the part of the reading where the angel visits Mary and tells her that she's going to be miraculously pregnant and that that child will be God's son.

The Hebrew people, of course, believe that God was on his way and that he would turn up at some point and he'd do something. But Mary was, I mean, she was special.

[1 : 04] She was special in that she was the first person to hear that God would arrive as a baby. And she was also the first person to hear his name, the name of the Savior, Jesus.

She was not only the first person to hear all of this, she responds wonderfully to it. So what I want to do just in this short sermon is I want to spend a few minutes looking at how she responds to this amazing, incredible news and then finish with what the angel actually said about this child.

So first, Mary's response. I think there's sort of two phases to her response. At the start, I think, I wasn't quite sure what to call it, but I think you could call it healthy questioning.

And then her second phase of her response was humble surrender. So healthy questioning and then humble surrender. Let's look at healthy questioning here. The reason I want to bring this up is I suspect that people who aren't particularly religious, who don't go to church much, perhaps think that Christians aren't allowed to question or that faith means you don't ever think, something like that.

So that's why I want to talk about that. Anyway, so let's have a look at this. So the angel appears to Mary and says, Greetings, favoured one, the Lord is with you. And her response? Well, she didn't go, Yes, of course, yes.

[2 : 23] I've heard about this kind of thing. Right, great. I'm so glad you're here. Cup of tea? No, it says very clearly that, verse 29, she tried to discern what sort of greeting this was.

What's going on here, she's thinking. What's going on? Why would an angel be speaking to me? I'm this kind of pregnant teenage. Oh, no, she's not pregnant at this point, but you know. I'm kind of this girl from some backwater town out in the middle of nowhere.

That's probably what's going through her head. And the angel tells her what's going to happen, and he says, You're going to conceive a child, and this child will be the Messiah. And her response?

Well, how will this be, since I'm a virgin?

It's a very reasonable question. To which the angel says, Well, nothing is impossible with God.

Now, why does the passage give us these details?

There's actually quite a bit of dialogue there. There's actually a little bit of back and forth. Why would the passage give us these details? Why is it important that this is part of the story? Well, it's because it's trying to contrast Mary's response to the angel with Zechariah's response to the angel.

[3 : 34] You remember Zechariah from the first reading. If you held up these two stories, the angel sees Zechariah, angel comes to see Mary. You held them up, and you could map out a sequence of events which was very, very similar.

Angel comes. It says they're both troubled. Angel says, Don't be afraid. You're going to bear a son. It tells them the name of the son, John, Jesus. It says they're going to be really great. They both ask questions.

This is followed up with a response from the angel. The writers of the Gospels, the writers here, these aren't stupid people.

I don't know how else to say it. They're not stupid people. They're not people that scribble down some ideas of how they thought things kind of happened. It's very carefully written.

And the way it's written, what it's trying to do, is it's trying to say to the reader, look at the difference between these two people. Look at the difference between how Zechariah responded compared to how Mary responded.

[4 : 38] They're models. They're models that are saying, respond like Mary, not so much like Zechariah. So let's look at the difference between how they responded. Just as a reminder, the angel tells Zechariah that his wife, who's getting on a little bit there, says his wife is going to have a baby.

And he says, well, how will I know this? She's too old to have kids. The angel tells Mary the same thing. You're going to have a baby. It's a miraculous kind of thing. She says, how can this be? I'm a virgin. What's the difference? It sort of sounds kind of similar, but there's a big difference there.

What's the difference? Zechariah, he asks for more evidence. Mary asks for an explanation.

Zechariah, he says, I can't be sure.

Mary says she can't understand. Now, the difference in the responses is not lost on the angel. You see how he reacts. To Mary, Gabriel says, well, let me explain this to you.

The Holy Spirit's going to sort this out, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. To Zechariah, remember, Zechariah says, I can't believe this. Give me a sign. The angel says to him, and it's such a great response.

[5 : 42] The angel says, I am Gabriel. That's a great name. I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you and to bring you good news.

It says, behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day. It doesn't say he wiggled his finger, but I am fairly sure there was finger wiggling going on.

You'll be unable to speak until these things take place. I mean, that, that's a smackdown, isn't it? So let me say it again. So both Mary and Zechariah are responding to something that is way beyond human horizons, something completely supernatural, but they respond very differently.

Zechariah says, we can't have a baby. This can't happen. I won't trust yet and demands a sign.

Says to the angel, come up with something. Come up with something to prove this.

I am the archangel, Gabriel. No. Be quiet. Compared to Mary, she's bewildered. Obviously, she's bewildered, but she just gives an honest expression of that bewilderment.

[6 : 51] She said, I don't understand, but I trust. Help me understand. How can this be? Help me understand. What's my point in saying all this? Look, the passage is asking us, it's asking us this.

What do you do when you're confronted with something you don't understand? Something supernatural. And Christianity, particularly about Christianity, Christmas is a great sort of time to think about this.

Look, you might be here and you might not be very religious. Somebody might have invited you because you like singing. Great. I'm so glad you're here. Now, if you take the message of Christmas quite seriously, you have to deal with the fact that there's this historical event, that this child was born in a manger, and the Bible says that this child is God.

Now, how are you going to react to that? Well, I think it says these two possible ways. Mary's way. I don't have all the answers, but I will trust.

Help me to understand this. Or the Zacharias way. I won't believe until I have all the answers. I think I just want to say to you, how are you going to react? How do you respond to this?

[7 : 57] You know, I think a really good question would be, as a follow-up question to this, would be, why is it that we respond one way or the other? The story is very telling in that the people who heard the message of the angels were in many ways opposites.

I mean, it's no accident that Luke compares two respondees from very different places in the kind of the social strata, in the ancient Near Eastern social strata anyway. So you've got this kind of status ladder.

You've got Zachariah, right? He's an adult. He's a male. He's married. He's a priest, which in this very religious community was a well-respected job, as it is today.

Am I right? Am I right? Who's with me? Hey? The angel's visitation came whilst he was in the temple.

He was doing good sort of religious kind of stuff. He was burning incense, you know. These are huge status markers. So on the status ladder, he's way up here.

[9 : 01] All these things, sources of pride and privilege in his community. Mary, on the other hand, what's she? Let's describe her. Unwired teenage girl. Where's she on that status ladder?

She's kind of down here, isn't she? So why did they respond so differently? I just think it's no accident that angels came to these two people like this, right?

When society places you up here, it's difficult to respond well to things you don't completely get because that requires humility. And humility is hard to get when you kind of exist up here.

I mean, it's obviously clear here that God is not impressed by status. And in his economy, humility completely outweighs ability and status and power. So I think what I'll do is I'll leave you with those thoughts and let you ponder how that applies to your life, perhaps, and your situation.

And we'll move on. Okay, where are we in the sermon? I said we're going to look at the two ways that Mary reacts to the angels' news. The first was healthy, humble questioning. Help me understand. I trust.

[10 : 05] I don't understand, but help me understand. Her second response was surrender. Let's have a look at that. We'll move quite quickly now. So at the end of the angel's explanations, verse 38, Mary has this just amazing line here, isn't it?

She says, So Mary was chosen by God for a gigantic, unprecedented, unrepeatable task.

And she embraced the purpose of God. Now, think about this for a moment. She's an unmarried teenager, engaged to Joseph, but not married.

This baby will start to show soon, won't it? And people are going to do the math. Remember, this is happening in a very sort of traditional, conservative, religious community a couple of thousand years ago.

Mary will be obviously very pregnant outside of marriage. And in those days, it's not a great look.

And yet, she embraces the purpose of God, despite the personal cost to her.

[11 : 15] She knows what this means to her in terms of reputation. She knows what people think of her. But she embraces God's will. What a fantastic example to us, I think. She's willing to be shamed and misunderstood.

Willing to be misrepresented. Willing to be stigmatized. In our society, you know, being publicly a Christian means all of these things can happen to you. But what an inspiration.

This teenage girl, bottom of the rung society. Willing to follow her convictions despite the cost. And I just think, man, I need this girl's courage. I need this teenage girl's courage.

She is willing to get out of the driver's seat of her life. Willing to say, I trust my life into your hands, God. Without conditions. Not knowing what it would look like.

Willing, though, to look foolish in the eyes of others. This is humble surrender. This Mary did this.

[12 : 15] Responded rightly to God's call with humility. And here's the amazing thing. She did this all before she knew what Jesus would do for her. Which brings me to the last thing I want to speak about.

Let's move on from Mary's responses. Humble questioning and surrender to what the angel actually told Mary. Verses 31 to 33. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.

And you shall call him Jesus. And 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. Those are remarkable claims. That God would become a human baby.

That the baby would be the king of the universe. And that that kingdom would be eternal. Just think about the first two of those claims. God who is the most high, the passage says.

[13 : 22] That's a great line. You don't get much higher, right? Then, I mean, I'm just stating the obvious. You don't get any higher than the most high. Yet, he will become a baby.

Do you get more vulnerable than a baby? When are you ever more vulnerable than a baby? You're not. So from the highest high to the lowest low.

That's the claim that this passage makes. No other religion makes a claim like this. That God will become vulnerable. And why would he do this? Why would God become vulnerable?

Why would God become this vulnerable child? This flesh and blood. This sort of unsafe, kind of exposed sort of creature. Why would God do that? Well, I'll give you one reason.

He became vulnerable so he could be hurt. So that he could die. That's why God became a child. Dorothy Sayers, who I love.

[14 : 22] It was a, she's dead now, but she's an English crime writer. She's a Christian poet. Wrote lots of stuff. Kind of an amateur theologian. Let me read what she wrote about this. The incarnation, which is the word that means God becoming human.

The incarnation means this. That for whatever reason, God chose to let us fall into a condition of being limited. To suffer, to be subject to sorrows and death.

He nonetheless had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. He himself has gone through the whole of human experience. From the trivial irritations of family life.

And the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money. To the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. He was born in poverty and suffered infinite pain.

All for us. And thought it well worth his while. So this is why God became human. To live with us. Mostly. So that he could die for us.

[15 : 27] I hope you see that this is why. I'm not finishing here. I hope you see this is why we can't just, we can't just respect Jesus. We can't just admire him as a great moral teacher.

We can't just say, oh, he was this great sort of hippie peace activist. And that's, that's my only engagement with him. No, he is God. He is higher than we can imagine. He became lower than anyone ever has.

So that we could have peace with him. This is the gospel story. This is, this is the Christmas story. And as, as we've seen. How we respond to this story. Is very important.

Are we willing to get out of the driver's seat of our life for this Jesus who would do this for us?

Surely this is somebody we can trust. And this is the challenge of the passage. If you have questions about this, I would love to talk to you about it.

[16 : 25] I'd be more than happy to talk to you about it. So I think I'm going to finish here. And I'll say this. Folks, Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.

Merry Christmas.