

Christmas Eve Meditation on Luke 1:26-38 and Luke 2:1-20

Title of the Meditation - "How Can This Be?"

Thursday, December 24, 2015

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A reading from Luke, chapter 1, verses 26-38:

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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 ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A reading from Luke, chapter 2, verses 1-20:

<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. <sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" <sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God.**

One of the things about the appearance of the angel to Mary which strikes me as interesting, maybe even amusing, is Mary's response when Gabriel announces to her what will happen. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son," the angel begins, and then builds upon this a lengthy series of increasingly eye-opening promises. "He will be great." But not just any person who rises to greatness, this one "will be called the Son of the Most High." Nor does this just mean he will be influential and well-regarded, no, he will rule: "[T]he Lord God will give to him the throne." And not just a subsidiary throne, under the greater rule of Rome, like the throne of Herod, but the throne "of his ancestor David," the free and unquestioned reign over a unified Israel which hasn't even existed for hundreds of years at this point. More incredible still: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom *there will be no end.*"

Gabriel reaches the end of this parade of superlatives, and Mary's response? She has apparently not gotten past the very first bit: "you will conceive." "How can this be," she asks, "since I am a virgin?" It reminds us in a charming way of how genuinely human Mary is. She hears this long list of ever-greater promises, but the only piece she questions is the very first. This extended inventory of predictions, each more impossible than the last, and the one she is hung up on is the smallest one of all, and ironically the only one she actually is plausibly capable of fulfilling: conceiving a child.

The simple fact of a child being born is only the first and smallest piece of the promise, to us overshadowed by the predictions that follow, of that son being the eternal king and Son of God; but to Mary, the birth looms larger than the much more enormous predictions that follow, all of which she seems to take in stride or doesn't even notice. Maybe it is *because* this is the one step that does seem realistic in her world that this one finds traction in her and provokes a response.

Maybe she is thinking of her parents' judgment, of her engagement to Joseph, of the hard world that other girls have found themselves in who have found themselves with child but without husband. One can well imagine this girl, feeling the immediacy of the fears and the social pressures, upon hearing all these descriptions of the glory that will belong to her son, having to blurt out, "Wait, hold on a second. Forget all that other stuff you just went on about. Go back to the beginning. Did you just say I am about to have a baby?"

We do not know whether she is challenging Gabriel, or simply perplexed and wants some kind of explanation to grasp onto, but there's an obstacle there for her, something she needs to get past before she can move on to the rest.

She's not alone in that.

When I was a freshman in college, there was a period when I struggled mightily with my faith. There were numerous points of confusion and uncertainty, but one particular major hurdle for me was that I didn't feel as though I could commit myself with assuredness to the Christian faith because I wasn't capable of doing so purely or perfectly. I was convinced that I had to offer myself rightly, and truly, to God, that if I did so at all for selfish reasons, such as wanting salvation or wanting to feel better in my troubled soul, it wouldn't count. My head was swimming in the sea of new college experiences. I was reading philosophers who argued that actions only have moral worth when they are done for purely objective, non-self-interested reasons, and as someone already inclined to think

that way, I could not escape my conviction that I was incapable of making a commitment to Christ that was worthy of him.

I should have read this passage from Luke.

For the angel has an answer for Mary. The answer to Mary's confusion as to how this can be is simple: it will be the Holy Spirit's work in her that will accomplish this. "For nothing will be impossible with God."

How many of us look at the promises we are told of in the Christian faith and ask, "How can this be?" Forgiveness, salvation, eternal life, rescue from the pit, joy and the everlasting peace of Christ... how can this be, since I am a sinner? How can this be, since I am a failure? How can this be, since I am weak and worn? How can this be, since I am lost? The obstacles loom large to us, the promises hidden behind them.

But today we hear and celebrate the promises breaking through all of this. God has not remained abstract, removed from our world and attainable only by achieving enlightenment for ourselves, nor remained aloof and accessible only to the worthy or to those who know the way around their own obstacles. Today we have read not only of perplexing promises, but of astounding occurrences. God has been born as a human being, has come to meet us, to find us in the places we are stuck and blind and set us free and give us sight.

We are gathered here tonight in hope, hope rooted in this old story, which we tell again and again: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

May God lift us up where we fall short, break down what we see as obstacle, overcome what we fear, and even in the midst of our perplexity grant us the faith and courage to say, along with Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Amen.