

THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

Luke 1:26-38

Key Verses: 1:32-33

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Today’s passage is a Christmas message given to the Virgin Mary. An angel came to her to deliver the message that God chose her to be the mother of the Messiah. We learn from the message who Jesus is and why we celebrate Christmas every year. May the Lord help us to know the true meaning of Christmas!

I. YOU WHO ARE HIGHLY FAVORED (26-30)

Look at verse 26. *“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee ...”* When Elizabeth was six-month pregnant with her son, John the Baptist, God sent the angel Gabriel to Galilee to make a very important announcement. Look at verse 27. *“... to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.”* Mary was a young girl who lived in a town called Nazareth in Galilee. When the angel visited her, Mary was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of King David. A young girl soon to be married is full of dreams about her future. We can imagine how she dreamed about a sweet home with Joseph as she was waiting for her wedding. But the angel’s visit on that day changed her life forever.

Look at verse 28. The angel went to her and said, *“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”* What do you think Mary was doing when the angel came? Most likely she was praying. She was probably praying for her wedding and her future, when the angel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Mary realized that this was no ordinary “Hello.” In fact, verse 29 says that she was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Why was Mary so troubled at the greeting? She was afraid that something big was about to happen to her life. But she didn’t want anything to happen to her, not when she already had a plan to marry Joseph. She was happy with her plan. She had Joseph. She didn’t need anyone else’s favor. She became apprehensive about the unusual greeting. It seemed to signal that her plan was about to be interrupted.

What did the angel say to Mary? Look at verse 30. *But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.”* What does “favor” mean? According to a dictionary, “favor” means a kind act, blessing or a gift. To be favored by God usually means to us to receive some human blessings. But we learn here that God’s favor is much more than human blessings. Indeed, God’s favor for Mary meant not only a blessing, but also a difficult mission for her.

Look at verse 31. *“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.”* God’s favor for her was to be the mother of Jesus. It was a mission to bring the baby Jesus to the world before her wedding. It was indeed a great blessing for this country girl. She was going to be the mother of the Savior of the world. At the same time, it was a very difficult mission for her. She was engaged to Joseph. But God wanted her to have the baby before their wedding. At that time, the Jewish society was too legalistic to embrace an unwed woman with a baby. She would have to face public disgrace and misunderstanding. But the angel did not say, “Mary, I have some good news and some bad news.” He said, “You have found favor with God.” In his grace, God chose Mary to carry out the mission. This was what it meant to be highly favored by God. Our God is a God of love. Our God is a God of mercy. We have to know that this God gives us not only human blessings, but also a mission that requires our heart, dedication and even life.

Abraham in Genesis wanted to be a noble father, meaning, all he wanted was a son. But God called him to be a blessing to all peoples of the world (Ge 17:5). God trained him to overcome his desire to be an ordinary man and grow spiritually to be a blessing to all nations. Likewise, many of us want to be great, and at the same time, we want to be ordinary with petty desires. But we learn from Genesis 1 that God created us in his own image and gave us his mission to be fruitful (Ge 1:28). God did not make us to work hard for only selfish goals in life. God gave us mission so that we may fulfill his purpose through our lives. St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” God did not save us at the cost of his son’s life so that we may go on living a selfish life. God recreated us in Christ Jesus to do good works. That’s why Paul mentioned God’s “grace and apostleship” together (Ro 1:5; Eph 3:8). We can live a truly happy and meaningful life when we find God’s mission for us and give our hearts to it.

To carry out God’s mission, Mary had to give birth to a child before her marriage. Humanly, it was impossible for her to accept such a costly mission. What would her village people say when they found out she was pregnant? They would misunderstand her, thinking that she had committed adultery. By the Jewish law, such women were stoned to death (Dt 22:23-24). What would her own family and relatives say to her? Most of all, what would her fiancé say to her when she told him, “I am pregnant but not because I cheated on you”? In fact, Joseph tried to divorce her quietly before God counseled him (Mt 1:19). God’s favor for Mary seemed to require unbearable shame and pain.

That was not all. God’s mission would bring even sharper pains to Mary. No mother wants to see her child suffer. But Mary had to watch her son when he went through so much mistreatment and suffering. Finally, she had to stand beneath the cross and suffer together with Jesus when they hammered huge nails on his hands and feet (Jn 19:25). Can you imagine the pain she had to endure? She must have felt the nails driven into her own heart (Lk 2:35).

II. “HIS KINGDOM WILL NEVER END” (31-33)

Of course, God knew this was a difficult mission. In verses 31-33, the angel helps Mary by explaining who Jesus is and what his kingdom is like. Mary needed to know this personally before accepting God’s grace. It is also important for us to know who Jesus is so that we can celebrate the birth of Jesus, not just as a tradition but with a real meaning.

First, you are to call him Jesus. Look at verse 31 again. *“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.”* The angel told Mary that she would have a son and she must name him Jesus. The son she was going to have was no ordinary child. She should not name him Joseph Jr. In the Bible, a person’s name is important. It represents who he or she is—the core of the person. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua which means “the Lord saves.” St. Matthew tells us that Mary had to name her son Jesus “because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). Sadly many people today use the name Jesus as part of their dirty language. They dishonor his name. But as Christians, we should remember who Jesus is, every time we call his name. Jesus is our Savior who came to save us from our sin and death.

Second, Jesus is the Son of the Most High. Look at verse 32a: *“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”* When asked about the greatest men in history, people usually mention Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius and Jesus. They mention the greatness of Jesus as a religious leader, a teacher, a healer, and so on. Indeed, while on earth, Jesus did great things. But the true greatness of Jesus does not rest on his human qualities or human achievements. He is great because he is the Son of the Most High. The angel Gabriel told Mary that her son would grow up to be a great man because he is the Son of God.

Later, when his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them, Jesus said this to them, “... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:43-45). Jesus is the Son of the Most High, but he gave up the power and glory in heaven to come down to us. He humbled himself to the level of a servant. Jesus cared for all kinds of lowly people as their friend and shepherd. He planted the hope of the kingdom of God in their hearts through his preaching. Finally he gave himself on the cross as a ransom sacrifice for our sins. He obeyed the will of God through his suffering and death. Alexander the Great was a great man in history. As a young man, he conquered many nations with his successful military campaigns. However, in order to achieve his ambition, many of his men were killed in battles. But our Lord Jesus showed his true greatness differently. He took care of his people. He served them with his compassionate heart. Finally, he gave his life on the cross for sinners like you and me.

Third, Jesus is the Messiah promised by God. Look at verse 32b. *“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David...”* Jesus was born as a descendant of King David (27). This is important for us to know because God had promised David that he would send the Messiah from his root (2Sa 7:11b-13). Gabriel told Mary that it was no

coincidence God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. Both she and her fiancé Joseph were descendants of David. In other words, her son would be born according to God's promise.

Jesus is the Messiah. Our Lord is Jesus Christ. Some people think that Christ is his last name. Actually, Christ is the Greek equivalent of Messiah in Hebrew. Both words mean "anointed one." So Jesus Christ means Jesus the Messiah. In biblical times, kings and prophets were anointed, meaning, they were ordained by pouring of oil on them. God would give Jesus the throne of David, not to become a political king, but to be the Messiah King. We celebrate the birth of Jesus because Jesus came to be our Messiah, our Savior. What does this mean to you personally? Without Jesus the Messiah, each of us is a death-row inmate, spiritually speaking. We are condemned to eternal punishment in hell, because of the sins we committed against God. We have fallen and we cannot get up on our own. But the good news is that Jesus, the Son of the Most High, came to us to save us. He paid the price of our sins with his own life. He shed his innocent blood on the cross with the prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). This prayer was for you and for me. All our sins are forgiven when we believe in Jesus Christ and commit our lives to him. We receive the gift of eternal life in his kingdom. This is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

Fourth, his kingdom is forever. Look at verse 33. "*...and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*" The angel told Mary that Jesus' kingdom will never end. He shall reign for ever and ever, as we sing in Handel's "Messiah." For ever and ever, forever and ever. Why is this important for us to believe?

People often say, "Nothing lasts forever. All we've got is what's in between hello and goodbye." They mean the sad truth about the fragile nature of human relationships. Many popular singers sing the pain of breaking up with the person they used to love. There is nothing eternal in this world. This truth has been the agony of many kings of nations in history. The kingdoms of the world rise and wane. The British Kingdom was vast with many colonies around the world. It boasted that the sun never went down in the kingdom. But the glory of the kingdom is gone now. The Roman Empire was powerful in Jesus' time. But the only thing left today is its ruins. Only the kingdom of Jesus is forever.

Again, why is this important for us to know? As I grow older, death is becoming more real to me. Each day, we are one-day closer to death. This is depressing to think about. But it is not if we are in Jesus. We believe that our life will not end in cemetery. Our life in this world is only temporary. Our permanent home is in heaven. By God's grace we will be with Jesus in paradise. I remember what Jesus said to the criminal who was being crucified along with him. The criminal had just repented his sin and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Do you know what Jesus said to him? He answered, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). What a wonderful promise! This is our true hope. We Christians long for this eternal kingdom. The purpose of Jesus' coming to this world was to take us to his eternal kingdom. And God wanted to use Mary to bring this Jesus into this world.

III. "I AM THE LORD'S SERVANT" (34-38)

What was Mary's response to God's calling? She first had a question. *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"* (34) How could virgin have baby without sleeping with man? It was a natural question to ask. In vitro fertilization or artificial insemination wasn't available then. The angel explained the mystery. He said in verse 35: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."* Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, meaning God is his father. He was born to a virgin. Some people find it hard to believe that a baby could be born to a virgin. So they dismiss it as a myth. But we believe the virgin birth as a fact. The author Luke was a medical doctor. He knew human biology. And he clearly tells us how God sent his Son to this world. God could have sent the Messiah on a spaceship. But Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born to a virgin. This made him 100% God and, at the same time, 100% human being. Jesus is fully God and fully man. Only Jesus can be our Savior because he is God. We are safe and secure in him because he is God Almighty. At the same time, Jesus knows what we are going through in life first-hand because he is human just like us. We can identify with him. Knowing this truth helps us to understand more deeply the life and mission of Jesus as we study the Bible.

Look at verses 36-37. The angel continued: *"Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."* Gabriel told Mary that she didn't have to worry about the biological aspect of the birth of Jesus. God who created the universe with his word could make anything happen. Nothing is impossible with God.

What was Mary's decision of faith? Let us read verse 38. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."* Then the angel left her. Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant." She could have said, "I am Joseph's fiancée. I don't need your favor. It is too hard for me to do this." But Mary didn't say that. She said, "I am the Lord's servant." A servant is ready to do what the Master says. Mary was ready to obey the Lord. She also said, "May your word to me be fulfilled." This is significant. Mary's decision was not based on her emotions or a blind resignation to fate. It was based on God's word. She made a decision of faith on the basis of God's promise. This is something we should learn from her.

When God wanted to send his Son Jesus to the world in accordance with his promise, he had to choose a woman to be the mother of Jesus. God chose, of all women, Mary--a woman pledged to be married. Why? Was it because she was beautiful as in the painting "Madonna" by Michelangelo? We learn here that God chose Mary because she was a woman of faith. She was ready to obey his word. She did not calculate the benefits and costs of being an unwed mother. Nor did she do a feasibility analysis. She trusted God's promise and replied, "I am the Lord's servant." Because of her faith, Mary has become known as the most blessed of all women (Lk 1:39-45).

May God help us to learn the obedient faith of Mary! As in her case, God's calling may come to us just when our lives are well-planned and seem to be promising.

Furthermore, living in this sinful world, obeying God usually means going against the world. To say “yes” to God, we often have to say “no” to the world. But we learn here that when we simply obey his word trusting his promises, God can use us in his redemptive history.

In today’s passage, we learn that Jesus came to save us from our sins and take us to the kingdom of God for eternal life. We also learn that God saved us through the blood of Jesus so that we may carry out his mission, not to live a selfish life. May God help each of us say “yes” to his high calling, as Mary did!