

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

How Can This Be So?

There's something very special about Christmas, isn't there? You can see it in people's faces, in their eyes as they look at you, in their smiles and in their voices as they wish you a "Merry Christmas," or "happy holidays." There's something unusual that you wish was usual; people have what we call "the Christmas Spirit." It's a time when we're more generous than usual, not just with our money as we buy gift for friends and family; we're generous with our time as well, going out caroling or visiting nursing homes or the elderly. It's a time when we put aside our differences; I'll never forget the true story of how in 1914, during World War 1, a British Expeditionary Force heard their "enemies," German soldiers in the trenches, singing Christmas songs and saw them decorating impromptu Christmas trees, and how the next day they declared what became known as "The Christmas Truce" and both sides exchanged gifts and played soccer in the no-man's land between the trenches. Christmas touches something deep in our souls that prompts us to behave far better than we usually behave.

Christmas is a time when more people are prone to walk into a church, often after a long absence, and find comfort and joy amidst the people around them. It's different from going to grandmother's house where everyone either knows each other or at least is related in some way. And it's different from going to a ball game or a movie where you go to be entertained even though many of the people around you may be strangers whose only common interest happens to be the team you're cheering or the movie you're watching. In church, at Christmas, there's something much deeper going on that has something to do with this person Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. And we're not coming here like we come to a ball game wondering how well the team is going to play. We're not coming as we would come to a movie wondering if it's going to be as good as the previews claimed it would be. I'd be flattering myself if I thought you

were coming here to hear my sermon and hoping that it would knock your socks off. We're not coming here as we would come to a family gathering because we feel it's our duty as sons or daughters or brothers or sisters. The truth of the matter is that you are here not to be entertained or out of some obligation. You're here because you want to be. You're here, in fact, *to hear a story.*

You're here to hear a story that you've most likely heard a thousand times before, but you don't seem to grow tired of it; you probably don't want to see a movie – even the best movie- a thousand times, and no one watches a replay of a great sports game a thousand times. But you will come to church to hear this same story because there's something about that story that affects you like no movie, like no great athletic competition, like no Broadway play, like nothing else ever has or ever will. You come because that story brings you “comfort and joy” every time you hear it – “for unto us is born this day...”

And let's face it; it's a fanciful story about angels and a virgin birth, about God being born in the flesh, that by all measures would be easy to dismiss, like a fairy tale. We are an educated people, and we're skeptical of things that seem fanciful or “make believe.” Yet Mary is no different from you or I; she stands perplexed in the presence of this angel. Many of us feel like Mary feels in today's scripture reading, perplexed and wondering “how can this be so?” Angels and virgin births were not common occurrences in the lives of first century Jewish women, and they are not common occurrences in our lives, yet this is the story that brings more people to church than on most any day of the years, except perhaps Easter when we once again go to church and hear that story about how that child grew up to be killed and came back to life, and resurrection is not an ordinary part of our human experience. While many may scoff – and even deep down we may say to ourselves, “I can't believe that I actually *believe* this stuff!” – we come here because deep down we do believe.

This all makes great sense to us. It speaks wonderful truth to us. It tells us, that despite all the struggles we face, despite death itself, we have a God who cares and comes to us to show us eternal life. It tells us that whatever trial and tribulation we may be going through, we are never alone. In that great Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” Philip Brooks hits the nail on the head when he writes, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” God is with us; there is no greater hope, and there is no need to fear. We hear the story, yet again, and something in our hearts grabs hold of it, something in our minds wishes to let go of our doubts and fears and say, “let it be so.”

And for some of us here, it truly IS so, because some of us have heard the voice of angels, messengers of God who have confirmed for us God's very presence with us and God's love for us. And so we come to share our stories, perhaps with those who are more skeptical but nonetheless have come with a desire to believe, who are looking for their own theophany, their own experience of God that will bless them with an assurance that all is well between them and God.

That's why we come together, year after year, week after week. We don't come to be told how to act right and what we have to do to please God because Christmas shows us that God is already pleased with us. We come because the story is true for us. And as each one of us carries a mix of faith and doubt we come to worship the one in whom we believe for his eternal presence with us, and we come for reassurance because we're so prone fall back into the shadows and ask, "How can this be so?" Deep down we know that the God who created the universe from nothing and formed us out of the dust of the ground, who knit us together in the womb, can also enter our world through the womb of a young peasant named Mary. He is a God of miracles. A God who brings us glad tidings that we may find comfort and joy all the days of our lives.