

***"Faith with No Fear"***

There has been a big argument going on for 2,000 years about whether Mary was a virgin or not. Believe it or not, there are some bishops in the Episcopal Church that doubt the virgin birth. I still don't know how they got to be priests, let alone bishops. It is on the Creed – and we are supposed to believe it, and we do; that is why we are here. There is no biblical proof to the as to whether Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus, and so that becomes a part of the argument, but as far as the first part, I believe that Mary was a virgin. It says so in the Bible and so there should be no dispute. We have crystal clear evidence of that in the Gospel of Luke, in verses just prior to today's Holy Gospel as to the first part. The Gospel says: *"The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "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."* (Luke 1:28-35)

The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, enabling her to do and be more than she could possibly do or be by herself, and at the same time *'the power of the Most High'* will overshadow her. Think about it - God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with His sovereign power. All this sounds amazing, but remember that in the Bible, and in Jewish and Christian thought, the true God is the One in whose image humans were made in the first place. We are not talking about a pagan god superseding roughly and inappropriately in the affairs of people, but about the One who made us for Himself. When He takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love; a love which will care for us and offer us His salvation.

Mary is a great example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through humanity. God's power and Holy Spirit result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way – there is no other explanation. Of course, no one is likely to be convinced of Luke's account of these events who isn't already open to the possibility that Jesus was also the One in whom Israel's God had made His personal appearance and walked into human history. Isn't it true that He split time in two – AD and what we used to call BC – but we now call BCE – Before the Common Era? He made His personal appearance and split time in two. This is a question of faith – of belief that through God, all things are possible!

Think about how and where Jesus would be born. The child to be born will be the Messiah, the anointed One, the king of the house of David. God had promised David a descendant who would reign for ever – not over Israel only, but also the whole world. And this coming king would be, God's Son. In 2 Samuel 7:14 God says, *"I will be His Father, and He will be my*

*Son.*” Could it get any clearer? In Psalm 2:7 God clearly says through King David, “*I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father.*” In Psalm 89:26-27 God proclaims, “*He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.' I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.*” Let’s face it – the breadcrumbs have been spread out through Scripture telling people that God’s own Son was coming – to save us! All we need to do is follow Him.

Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and some now find it hard to grasp and believe. All you need to do is turn on the TV and all of the Christmas shows have nothing to do with the Reason for the Season! We talked about that last week. We know that Jesus is the true ruler of the world in a way which leaves Caesar, and the powers of the world today, a long way behind, in the dust. It is easier for people to believe in other things than to grasp what happens here in Luke chapter 1, and later in Luke chapter 2. We have the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all earthly empires – maybe that’s one reason why it’s so controversial. The concern and hubbub about whether Mary could have possibly conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, some people don’t even want to even think that there might be a King who could claim this sort of absolute power and loyalty.

There is more going on during this time. Remember the puzzled Zechariah who, filled with doubt questioned the Angel Gabriel and because of that doubt he was struck speechless until the day of circumcision of his son, John the Baptist. Think about the obedient humility of Mary. She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, rather than filled with doubt. There is no doubt in her heart at all. Instead, faced with the chance to be the mother of the Messiah, not really sure or understanding what this will involve, she says the words which have resonated through the years as a model of the human response to God’s unexpected calling. She said, “*I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.*” (Luke 1:38) There is a great contrast in these 2 people’s responses. Mary had faith with no fear.

Mary then goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, Zachariah’s wife, who the angel told her was pregnant. When Mary got to the hill country of Judea, near Jerusalem, Luke’s Gospel tells us, “*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"* (Luke 1:41-42) Elizabeth was given a supernatural knowledge by the Holy Spirit that Mary was not just pregnant, but she was bearing the Son of God – the Messiah!

It is important for us to close with the words that Mary responded with to Elizabeth, which has been called the ‘Magnificat.’ Listen to these special words – filled with love and faith - and no fear - that Mary said: “*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has*

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*brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46-55)*

There is no doubt in what is happening to her, and to her Son. She is filled with faith – with no fear - in the power and love of God for His people. Tomorrow evening we will gather here twice and celebrate and remember the fruit of this miracle, which we read about and heard about today, and which we will witness to tomorrow, which we call the Feast of the Nativity.