

**Love Came Down:  
THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT**

**Luke 1:26-38**

*God gives Mary (and us) participation,  
promise, and power.*

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One of the new traditions that has grown in popularity the last few years for couples expecting a baby is the gender reveal party. In developed countries, it is now standard procedure to do ultrasounds on pregnant women to make sure the baby is OK. In the process, the sex of the unborn child can usually be determined. In 2008, a Chicago journalist named Jenna Karvunidis made a big deal out of sharing with her public what the gender of her baby was going to be. The practice caught on. Now, you can make a cake, blast confetti out of a cannon, burst a pinata, or shoot off fireworks to let the world know if your baby is going to be a boy or a girl.<sup>1</sup>

Gender reveal parties reminded me of a story I heard years ago about an older elementary Sunday School class that performed their version of the Christmas story. These were very sophisticated children who had watched a lot of TV, so they knew how it was supposed to go. When the time came for the birth, one of the children, dressed as a doctor, entered the stable. Joseph stood by while two angels held up a sheet to give Mary and the doctor privacy. There were some mild groans from behind the sheet, and after a few moments, the doctor stood up and announced, “Congratulations, Joseph! It’s a God!”

Today we want to focus on another surprising announcement, which also had a gender reveal message thrown in. Luke begins his Gospel with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older couple who had never had children. One day while Zechariah was serving in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that Elizabeth would conceive and have a son. This boy would grow up to be a messenger of God, calling people to prepare the way of the Lord. Indeed, Elizabeth did become pregnant and went into seclusion to care for her unborn baby.

Gabriel’s next visit, six months later, was to a young woman named Mary in the Galilean village of Nazareth. She was engaged to be married to Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Gabriel greeted Mary and called her the favored one and said God was with her. My version says she was perplexed; other versions say she was troubled, disturbed, confused, or “thoroughly shaken.”<sup>2</sup> It was upsetting, to say the least. It’s not every day you meet an angel of the Lord. Gabriel told her not to be afraid, then he made this incredible announcement: “*You will conceive in your womb and*

*bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*"<sup>3</sup> Mary questioned how this could happen, since she was not married, and the usual way of making babies was not available to her. Gabriel replied, "*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>4</sup> He mentioned Elizabeth, who was also having a miracle baby, and reminded Mary that nothing is impossible for God.

How incredibly overwhelming this must have been! But with a deep faith and spiritual peace, Mary made a remarkable, history-making, earth-shattering commitment of her life: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"<sup>5</sup> With those words, Mary became the first disciple of Jesus.

That's such a beautiful story, and it's familiar to most of us. I think we have heard it so much that it just rings in our ears as a sweet tale of a wonderful kid who bowed to the will of God. I don't think we realize what an unprecedented, miraculous, scary, thrilling kind of announcement this was. How can we hear it fresh today? Where is God's word in this story for us?

One thing to realize is that God never acts without a partner, at least not after creation happened. As you look through Scripture, every act of God employs a human actor, a willing partner with God in the work of the Kingdom. Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and now Mary follow the leadership of God and accomplish phenomenal things. I suppose God could have dropped Jesus fully grown into the Judean desert, and he would have done all right. But God didn't do that. Or Mary could have replied to the angel, "You know, this is not a good time. I have a wedding coming up, and having a baby now would embarrass my family and trash my reputation, not to mention make things really awkward with my fiancé. No thanks." But she didn't. Would God have gone on to the second choice if Mary had refused? We don't have to speculate, because Mary agreed to participate.

God always uses human actors to accomplish God's purposes in the world. God invites us to participate in the movement of the Spirit toward the completion of creation. We get to be part of the process of salvation for planet earth.

Christianity is not a spectator sport; God wants us to get involved. Have you ever felt like you were participating in the work God is doing in the world? I have seen so much of it going on in the last few months, as we have been adjusting to this new reality around us. We have been reaching out in so many ways into our community to help feed people: breakfast on the streets, Thanksgiving dinner, casseroles for the missions in town, sack lunches for the police officers to distribute, and many others. I've been seeing creative ways for people to be involved with our children and youth, to keep training them up in the way they should go. There are small groups meeting in homes and online and outdoors, trying to stay connected to the Word and to each other.

One of the things we figured out early on in the pandemic was that if the church was going to continue to survive and thrive, it was going to take more personal responsibility. Individuals will have to be more intentional about prayer and worship online. Small group leaders and members will have to work to keep connected. Parents will have to get engaged in the discipleship work with their children and youth. We're not typically that intentional. Over the years we have gotten used to having our religion delivered to us for our consumption. Now we have to get involved if it's going to happen. That's why we called it Church 2.0; it's a new version, and I think it may be the best thing that ever happened to us. I believe it's a way God has worked to bring something good out of the evil of the pandemic.

Participation in the process is such a Biblical perspective on life. God extends grace to us, freely and without our deserving, but then we respond in faith. And the response of faith includes Kingdom action on our part—the work of discipleship. We hear this participation dynamic in Philippians 2, where Paul says, “*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”<sup>6</sup>

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Gabriel announced that Mary had found God's favor. Mary responded with an act of faith: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"<sup>7</sup> And the world changed forever.

The announcement by Gabriel was the fulfillment of a promise that had been made long before, that God would send a Savior to God's people. The promise is filled with royal language—the throne of his ancestor David, reign over the house of Jacob, a kingdom without end. Whatever obstacles or difficulties come up, God will make a way. God will fulfill the promise. Like Isaiah said, the rough patches will be made smooth. The mountains of despair will be made level. The valleys of grief and pain will be filled in. We are on a highway to God, and there's no stopping us now. The angel said it, "*Nothing will be impossible for God.*"<sup>8</sup> When God is on your side, there is always possibility, because our God is a God of the promise.

Teresa of Avila was one of the great mystics and saints of the church. She lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Spain. In addition to her spiritual writings, she was also a reformer in the church and spent her time and energy building up the Carmelite order. Raising money to build convents was always a struggle. During one of her building projects, a pessimistic friend told her, "Trees and a few dollars cannot build a convent."

Teresa replied, "That may be true, but Teresa and a few dollars and God can build anything!"<sup>9</sup> With God, nothing is impossible. The possibility of God is unlocked by the response of faith. That's when great things tend to happen.

A word of possibility and promise and hope is always welcome. It's especially welcome at the holidays, because the holidays are tough times—for families, for those who have lost loved ones, for those who are struggling to make ends meet. Especially this year, we need to remember the promise. We are losing more people to the virus every day than were killed in either Pearl Harbor or 9/11. This week the number of American casualties to COVID-19 passed the total number of American combat fatalities in World War II. Holiday gatherings and travel have been cancelled or are at best dangerous. We need the promise of faith today. We need some great things to happen.

Great things can happen because the response of faith plugs us in to the power of God. Participation, promise, power—that’s the package of faith. We see the power of God in the announcement of Gabriel to Mary because this whole situation is an act of God. Mary is a little incredulous when she hears the promise: “*How can this be?*” The angel says, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*”<sup>10</sup>

That’s an interesting choice of words on Gabriel’s part. The word “overshadow” is used two other places in the Bible. The first is in Exodus when Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to meet with God. The glory of the Lord overshadowed the mountain because God was there—in person, talking with Moses. The other place the word is used is in the Transfiguration story when the face and clothes of Jesus are transformed into the light of glory. Then the story says that the glory of the Lord “overshadowed” the mountain and the voice from the cloud spoke about Jesus: “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.*”<sup>11</sup> In the same way that the glory of the Lord appeared on the mountains of Sinai and the Transfiguration, Gabriel announces that the power of God is going to surround Mary, and she will carry the Son of God in her womb. That’s powerful stuff.

The same power that God displayed in Bible times is the same power God still has. God has not become old and feeble. God has not retired. God is not dead. Our God is still a God of power, who creates the possibilities, who invites us to participate in the work of salvation. Theologian A. W. Tozer, author of *The Pursuit of God*, wrote, “Anything God has ever done anywhere, He can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, He can do for you.”<sup>12</sup> That’s the amazing promise of God’s power for us today.

The bottom line, with this and almost any text, is: How does this make us want to live? What effect will this have on our behavior? What difference does the big announcement to Mary make in our lives?

Mary’s response of faith that day affected her until the day she died. She did become pregnant, and gave birth to the Son of God in the Bethlehem Hilton, nicely appointed in straw, cobwebs, and ox dung. She pondered the shepherds, who heard the angels sing and came to glorify God. She saw the

wise men worship her baby and received their gifts. She saw him grow to be a man and teach God's way and perform miracles and heal the sick and raise the dead. Simeon the prophet predicted when Jesus was a baby that Mary's heart would be pierced, and she had to watch as her Son was nailed to the cross and crucified. Don't you know every blow must have broken her heart? But by some accounts, Mary was also one of the first to see the empty tomb and to realize that her Boy had won the victory over death and evil and sin for the whole world.

We don't know how long Mary lived after Jesus died, but I'll bet she didn't retire, either. I'll bet every day she listened for the voice of the angel and responded in faith to do whatever she could for her God.

Bishop Ken Carter, in a devotional this week, wrote: "As we approach a most unusual Christmas marked by multiple pandemics, we can rediscover the discipleship that Mary teaches us. In saying yes to God—"let it be with me according to your word"—she gives us a pattern for our own journey toward faithfulness. In a season when many of us cannot kneel at familiar altars, gather around sacred tables, embrace the fullness of family or know the encouragement of friends, we may perhaps find ourselves going deeper into the tradition of Mary and the annunciation... Amidst griefs, injustices, and constraints, there is the disruptive promise of the Holy Child and the assurance, through it all, that God is with us."<sup>13</sup>

The third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday for the Latin word that means "Rejoice!" Today we can rejoice that God invites us to participate in the Kingdom work of salvation. We can rejoice that our God gives us the promise of a Savior, so we can always have hope. We can rejoice that our God is a powerful God—an awesome God—and nothing can stop God's victory. That is Good News worth celebrating this Christmas!

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_reveal\\_party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_reveal_party).

<sup>2</sup> *Bible Gateway.com*, Luke 1:29.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:31-33.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:37.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/teresa-of-avila-780>.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 9:35.

<sup>12</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Leadership Weekly*, October 9, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Carter, Fourth Sunday of Advent, *Meditations for Advent*, Duke Divinity School, 2020.