

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/24/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 24th

Luke 1:26-38

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Nothing will be impossible with God

The announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she will conceive and become the mother of a baby boy which she is to name Jesus, YHWH is salvation, is one of the iconic moments of the Christian celebration of Christmas and a famous scene in most nativity plays. As a result, all of us bring a lot of preconceived ideas and experiences into this text. Perhaps this year we can approach this text afresh and look through new eyes.

Luke 1:26-38 Commentary

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

The “*sixth month*” refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (v. 25). The text is clear in v.26 that God is the author of these events, sending the Gabriel as a messenger. Nazareth is described as a city. There is no equivalent word for “town.” Only “city” or “village” exist. While Nazareth is hardly a thriving metropolis, it was bigger than a village. The word “*parthenos*” is used in Greek which translates as virgin. Unlike the modern equivalent of the engaged to be married, betrothal was a more formal relationship which lasted about a year and was as legally binding as marriage. Luke clearly identifies Joseph’s connection with the Davidic line.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

“*Favored one*” can also be rendered as “*one who grace is bestowed upon.*” Not surprisingly, this greeting troubled Mary. Who me? Why had she found favor in God’s eyes? Why was God bestowing grace upon her?

³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Gabriel reassures Mary. As earlier, favor (*charis*) can also be rendered as grace. God bestowed grace upon Mary rather than Mary being a source of grace for others as the Catholic rendering of *Hail Mary, full of grace... would suggest.* God chooses who God chooses.

³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² 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

father David,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Gabriel then explains what will happen. *lēsous* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *Joshua* meaning *the Lord (YHWH) is salvation*. Luke uses “*Most High*” to refer to God (1:76; Acts 7:48; 16:17) and thus Jesus as the Son of the Most High is the Son of God. The Messiah was expected to be from the line of David. The House of Jacob refers to the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:3; Isaiah 2:5-6; 8:17; 10:20; 14:1; 48:1). This is the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promise to David (2 Samuel 7:11a-13): “*Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*”

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary’s response was puzzlement rather than doubt. She asks for an explanation. Clearly, Mary is expecting something to happen quickly before she is married to Joseph. The literal translation here is “*not had intercourse with a man.*”

³⁵ And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

The angel explains how the virgin birth is possible through God and the implication. Gabriel also explains about Elizabeth and emphasizes that nothing is impossible with God.

³⁸ And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Mary’s response is one of faith – she describes herself as the slave-girl of the Lord – she expresses complete obedience and thus becomes the first disciple of Jesus.

Reflection and Action

Many have noted how the text has unmistakable parallels to the angel’s visit to Zechariah a few verses earlier (1:12-20):

Zechariah (1:12-20)	Mary (1:26-38)
Zechariah was troubled (v.12)	Mary was greatly troubled (v.28)
The angel said to him (v.13)	The angel said to her (v.30)
Do not be afraid (v.13)	Do not be afraid (v.30)
Will bear you a son (v.13)	Will...bear a son (v.31)
And you shall call his name (v.13)	And you shall call his name (v.31)
He will be great (v.15)	He will be great (v.32)
Said to the angel (v.18)	Said to the angel (v.34)
The angel answered (v.19)	The angel answered (v.35)
Behold (v.20)	Behold (v.38)

Luke intentionally invites his readers to compare the responses of Zechariah and Mary and in doing so gain further insights from this passage. In a nutshell:

The childless old man, righteous and blameless, who dedicated his life to serve the Lord as a priest, who must have prayed for a son for decades, was selected by lot (the Holy Spirit) to be the priest on duty at that time to burn incense in the temple. This day was perhaps the highlight of his career. Some priests were never chosen to serve in such a way. The professional cleric and privileged leader in a male dominated society was confronted by an angel in the temple, on-the-job so to speak. Zechariah's response to the angel's message that God had answered his prayer was doubt.

The young maiden, who Luke provides no further information about her credentials, was considered barely more than chattel in that society. Mary was confronted by an angel with an even more unlikely situation that was about to come to pass. Mary's response was faith.

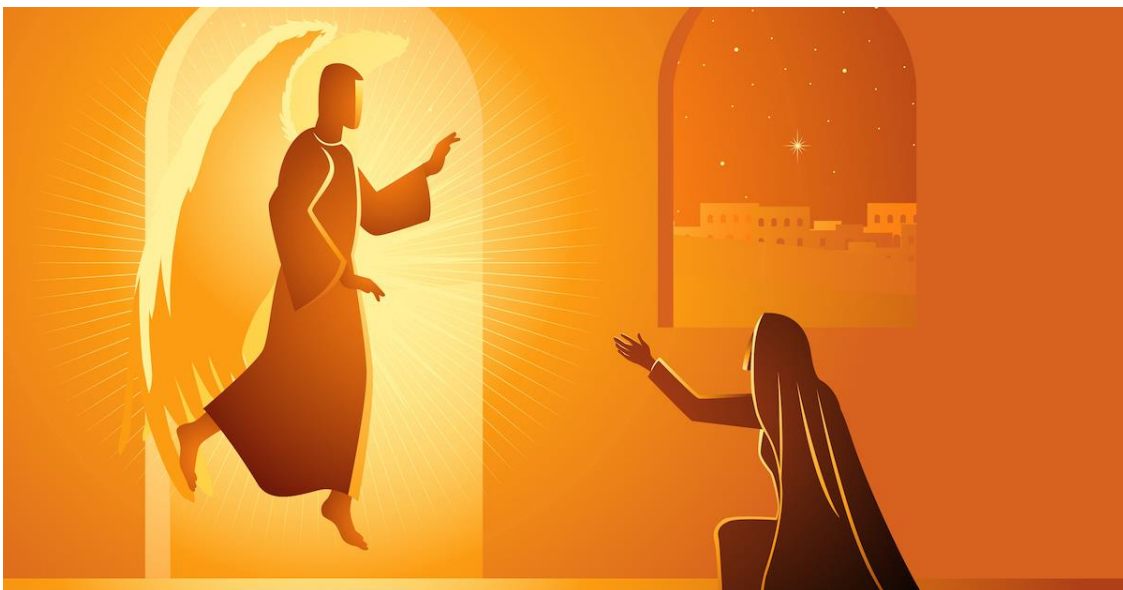
Two messages stand out in this lectionary text that are particularly appropriate to emphasize at this time of year and at this season we face as a nation. The first came from the angel Gabriel's mouth:

"Nothing will be impossible with God" (v.37).

The second is Mary's response:

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (v.38).

Gabriel's message to Mary remains the message to the Church still in the world on this Fourth Sunday of Advent in 2023 - no matter who God calls us to be or what God calls us to do: ***Do not be afraid... nothing will be impossible with God.*** How will we respond? Like the knowledgeable and seasoned Zechariah or with the child-like faith of Mary?



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