

Luke 1:26-38

“According to Your Word”

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 24, 2023

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We confess: *“[I believe in] one Lord Jesus Christ, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man.”* (Second Article of the Nicene Creed)

“Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” “Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish, for better or for worse, till death parts you?” “Do you promise to be my best friend, pinky swear?”

We live in a world of promises. Some promises are kept, but so many promises are broken.

It used to be that a simple handshake would be all that was needed for a promise. But we know that this is no longer the case. Today, so many promises have to be backed up with long and often complicated legal documents to make sure that there will be no wiggle room and no loophole by which one in the promise can escape the obligations of that promise. Today, it is simply not sufficient to just depend on another’s word.

Even in the closest of relationships, promises are broken, and people are let down, disappointed, and left feeling betrayed. A father tells his son, “I know I promised to be at your game, but something came up.” A man tells his wife, “There’s someone else.” A politician tells his constituent, “I know I said I would never vote to increase taxes, but I did it anyway.” One nation tells another, “We will not honor our trade agreement.” Maybe you’ve been the victim of a broken promise. Or perhaps, you’re the one who has broken a promise.

Our text this morning is the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. This great announcement to Mary and, ultimately, to us some 2,000 years later is part of the ongoing fulfillment of God’s promises. So, today on this Fourth Sunday in Advent, we have the assurance that we can always trust God, for He acts according to His Word.

God gives us the promise of His Word even at our worst moments. At the Fall into sin, when Adam and Eve deserved nothing but condemnation and death because of their disobedience toward God, the Lord gave the first promise of the Savior. While God pronounced judgment upon sin, He also offered words of hope as He promised to provide the Savior from sin.

God established a covenant relationship with the children of Israel – in other words, this is a relationship built on promises that God has made. Even though Israel was often unfaithful in this covenant relationship, God continued to act on their behalf according to the Word that He spoke. He made promises and He was divinely bound to keep those promises.

But why? Why does God need to keep His promise if those to whom He promised were unfaithful to Him? After all, God's chosen people often worshiped false gods, false idols. God's chosen people repeatedly ignored God's Law. They kept doing what they thought was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6). We keep doing things that we shouldn't do and keep on doing them. Why would God remain loyal to them? Why would God remain loyal to us? Well, God chose them, and God chose us as His treasured possession.

So, what does all of this have to do with the annunciation to Mary? Well, again, God was keeping His promise. He promised the Savior to redeem fallen mankind.

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary” (Luke 1:26-27).

Six months earlier, the angel Gabriel made the announcement to Zechariah that he in his old age would be a father to John the Baptist. He was greatly troubled. Now, six months later this same angel visits a virgin named Mary and announces to her, ***“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus”*** (Luke 1:30-31).

Mary, too, was greatly troubled. She likely thought, *“How could this be an honor? Who am I? I'm just an average woman. I'm not from Jerusalem. Plus, what will people say about me? I am not even married. How could I bear a son?”*

As in Zechariah's case, Gabriel first calmed Mary's fears and assured her that she had found favor with God. Then Gabriel imparted to her the astounding news that she would conceive and bear a son and call His name Jesus. Jesus is the same name as "Joshua" in the Hebrew, and every devout Jew knew what that name meant.

Mary knew. She was a Jew who believed in the promised Savior. And "Jesus" was not just a mere name. She knew exactly what "Jesus" meant. Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation" and even more "the One through whom Yahweh brings salvation."

If Mary had entered any thought that her son would be like the renowned Joshua of old, the godly, courageous, resourceful leader and commander of Israel, the successor of Moses, Gabriel's next words would dispel that idea, for he said, ***"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, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end"*** (Luke 1:32-33).

So, Jesus will be infinitely greater than the famous commander of Israel. Mary's son will also be called ***"the Son of the Most High."*** Jesus is the very Son of God and His kingdom will have no end.

Now, like all Jewish girls, they all hoped that they would be given the honor to be the mother of the promised Savior, but Mary never expected this honor to be given to her. Yes, she was a descendant of David, just as Joseph was. But they were average folks. They didn't live in any palace. They lived in the backwater and forgotten town of Nazareth. *"What good could come from there?"*

But Mary acted different than Zechariah. She never doubted God's promises. She only questioned the how. ***"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"*** (Luke 1:34)

But every promise of God is aimed at faith. Every divine promise is intended to generate faith in the promise or to nourish the faith which embraces God's promises. Mary never responded with disbelief as Zechariah did. Mary believed that God would give her such a wondrous son, and she was willing to be the mother of that great Son, the Messiah.

Mary has faith in God, but how is God going to do this? She knew how children were conceived. But she had not entered into any such a relationship with Joseph or any other man. So, how could this be?

Gabriel gave her the answer. He told Mary that she would conceive in a supernatural way. She would conceive the Messiah by the Holy Spirit. Now, human reason would balk at that, but Mary believed. And to strengthen Mary's faith, Gabriel gave further proof. He directed her attention to her relative Elizabeth. A wonder had taken place in Elizabeth. She was barren and in advanced age but is now pregnant. So, this same God who had brought that about for Elizabeth would perform an even greater miracle in Mary, since nothing is impossible with God.

So, how could all of this happen? Only God could make it happen. Only God could give a barren woman a child. Only God could give a virgin a child. So, Mary says, ***"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your Word"*** (Luke 1:38).

We are all constantly exposed to human rationalism. So many today say that what happened to Mary and Elizabeth was impossible. Their rationale is that they have never seen such a miracle. But just because you haven't seen it doesn't make it impossible. God is God and He works wonders. He makes the impossible, possible. And He always keeps His Word. After the Fall in the Garden, He promised the coming Savior and when it was the fullness of time, He would send the Savior for sinful mankind. He would send Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us!

Perhaps, you've been the victim of someone who didn't keep his word and you've experienced loss and pain as a result. Maybe you're the one who hasn't kept your word. Maybe, you have broken promises, and you've betrayed trusts. But God invites us to come to Him for forgiveness.

Mary would bear the fullness of God in her womb. This Child is the very Savior of our sins. This Child became incarnate to suffer and die our punishment, so that all who would trust in Him would live forever!

In the fullness of time, this Child in Mary's womb would do everything necessary for your salvation. He continues to save us today through His Word and Sacrament. And He will return in glory on the Last Day! God always keeps His Word. He always keeps His promises. May we always respond to God in faith and say with Mary, ***"Let it be to me according to Your Word."*** Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +