

“According to Your Word”

Luke 1:26-38

December 24, 2017

4th Sunday In Advent

You’ve really got to hand it to Mary. In addition to seeing an angel (Gabriel) appear to her, Mary has a lot of stuff thrown at her in our Gospel reading today. The angel’s message was fantastic and glorious. Mary was about to become pregnant and give birth to a son without having had any sexual contact with a man. As if such a virgin birth was not big enough news, the identity of this son would be even bigger news. He would be the Son of the Most High. And if THAT wasn’t enough, this baby’s purpose in life would be even bigger. He would be called Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21) He would inherit the throne of his father, King David, the greatest king in Jewish history, and rule forever. The angel, the message, the implications all inspired Mary to respond, “How can this be?”

Only that’s not exactly what she said. “How can this be?” indicates doubt and disbelief. It’s a question that wonders if God could really become a tiny human baby. It’s a question that wonders if God would choose to save the world and bring about the eternal Kingdom of God in such a humble and ordinary way through such a humble and ordinary young girl. But it’s a question that Mary never asks. We, on the other hand, would ask such a question. In fact, we ask it all the time. We may not see angels, but we get fantastic and glorious messages from God in Holy Scriptures which we question and doubt.

The only part of the angel’s message that troubled Mary was the greeting, “Greetings, O favored one!” Mary probably did not feel very favored by God. She probably recognized herself as an unimportant imperfect human being. We, on the other hand, would have no problem believing that we are favored by God since we tend to have very high opinions of ourselves. Yet the Scripture says, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one...There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Rom. 3:10-12,22-23) “How can this be?,” we might say. “Aren’t we all pretty decent people who live pretty decent lives? How can we be considered to be unrighteous, worthless, and common sinners?”

Like Mary, we are told that her child, Jesus, was the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The Scriptures say that this Child would grow up, die on a cross, and come back to life from the dead three days later. Somehow, this man’s death on a cross would be counted as the punishment for the sins of all people who had lived or ever would live and His resurrection from the dead could raise other people from the dead, too. “How can this be?,” we might ask. “How could the death of a 33 year old rabbi long ago in a country far away have any bearing on my life in Montana in the 21st century? How can anyone come back from the dead? Once you’re dead, you’re dead.”

The Bible says that Holy Baptism brings the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection to each of us individually. Our sins are washed away and we are given a

new life here on this earth which will continue forever in heaven. “How can this be?”, we might say. “How could a little splash of water on the head bring such great spiritual benefits? Wouldn’t it make more sense, as some have said, to see baptism as an ordinance of God which we obey that shows our commitment of faith in and our loyalty to God?”

The Bible says that ordinary men can forgive sins in holy absolution and that this forgiveness is as valid as if Christ Himself spoke it. “How can this be?”, we might ask. “How can an ordinary sinful human being like myself forgive my sins? Surely only God can forgive sins.”

The Scriptures say that ordinary bread and wine can convey the body and blood of Jesus Christ to us and that eating and drinking His body and blood in faith grants each of us the personal forgiveness of sin and strength for our faith. “How can this be?”, we might ask. “How is it possible for Jesus’ body and blood to be in ordinary bread and wine? And even if it were possible, how could Jesus’ body and blood be on many different altars at the same time? Wouldn’t it make more sense, as some have said, to see the Lord’s Supper as a meal memorializing Jesus’ suffering and death that that the bread and wine only represent Jesus’ body and blood?”

How can any of these things be? They don’t seem to make any sense. Yet they are no harder to believe than that things that Mary is asked to believe. Yet Mary does not ask, “How can this be?” Mary asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Her answer expresses faith, not doubt; belief, not disbelief. She is merely asking for an explanation about how they will happen. How will I be so favored? How will all these wonderful things?

The angel’s answer is interesting. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;...For nothing will be impossible with God.” In other words, through the working of the Holy Spirit and the power of God, these seemingly impossible things will happen. Nothing is impossible for God. Whatever the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, promises, His power will accomplish. A virgin can become pregnant. God can take on human flesh. One man – the God-man Jesus Christ – can save the world and rule the world forever.

The same is true for the extraordinary things God promises to you. How can you believe them? What was true for Mary is true for you. Whatever the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, promises, His power will accomplish. The death of the God-man, Jesus Christ, 21 centuries ago can be counted as the punishment for your sins. Dead people can rise to live again: first, Jesus, and then those who belong to Him. Water can wash away sin and create new life in Holy Baptism. Men can speak in the place of God and forgive sin in Holy Absolution. Bread and wine can convey the body and blood of Jesus Christ and grant forgiveness of sins. “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Mary’s response to the angel’s explanation is very telling: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” In other words, Mary is saying that she is merely a servant for the Lord. She cannot and will not tell God what He can do and how He can do it. She accepts His way of doing things and believes that everything that has spoken to her will come true. These things will happen, not ot

because she understands the details, not because it makes sense, or not because it is scientifically possible. All of these things happen “according to your word.” God’s word has power. Whatever God speaks, happens. In creation, God spoke and things came into being. When God speaks now things happen according to His Word.

And so they do for Mary. Mary does become pregnant without having contact with a man. She does give birth to a son. This Son, Jesus, is attested to be the Son of God by His Heavenly Father, by He Himself, by His disciples, and by the Word of God itself. He saves His people from their sins by dying on the cross and rising again. He is the king from the house of David whose kingdom shall never end.

May our response be the same as Mary’s: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Be the servant of God, not the master of God! Do not try to tell Him what He can or cannot do or how or how not he should do it. Simply accept His way of doing things and believe that everything He has spoken to you will come true.

And it will for us. You have forgiveness of sin and life everlasting through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of this Baby, born of the Virgin Mary. Baptism has washed away your sin and given you a new life. The words of Holy Absolution spoken by the pastor actually do forgive your sins as validly as if Christ Himself stood before you. The bread and wine upon our altar actually do bring you the true body and true blood of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that by eating and drinking them you have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, 12th century monk, mystic and theologian, is reported to have said that there are three miracles of Christmas: 1. That God should become a man, 2. That the Son of God would be born of a virgin, and 3. That Mary should have faith to believe these miracles could take place within her (Quoted by in Martin *Luther’s Christmas Book*, translated by Roland Bainton). As we prepare to celebrate Christmas tonight, we stand in awe of the first miracle – that God should become man; we marvel at the second miracle – that the Son of God would be born of a virgin; and we share in the third miracle – that Mary should have faith to believe these miracles could take place within her. For God has worked the miracle of faith in you so that you not only have come to know the promises of God, but you have come to believe these promises are for you and have been kept by God, no matter how hard they are to understand, and comprehend. In any promise that God makes to you, instead of asking “How can this be?”, may you, like Mary, always ask, “How will this be?”, knowing that God can do anything and trusting that He will keep every promise to you. Amen.