“I AM THE LORD’S SERVANT”

Luke 1:26–38

Key Verse: 1:38

“ ‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.”

This past week at our nightly prayer meetings we’ve been looking at Luke 1:6–25. God sends the angel Gabriel to meet a very old priest, Zechariah, while he’s serving in the temple in Jerusalem, to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth, who’s also very old and who’s been barren her whole life, are now going to be the parents of John the Baptist. Their “miracle” son John would one day grow up to become the long-awaited forerunner of the Messiah, and he’d have a very powerful ministry. He’d call the entire nation back to God. Old Zechariah couldn’t believe this good news, and so God took away his power of speech for nine months. But elderly Elizabeth quietly believed it, and she was so comforted by what God was doing. In telling the story of Jesus Luke first tells the story of the parents of John the Baptist. Why? It’s to show us how God works. To most people Zechariah and Elizabeth seemed like insignificant senior citizens who were out of touch with the real world. But to God, they were the most important people of the time, so important that their names got included in the Bible. God chose to work through Zechariah and Elizabeth because they were praying people, faithful to God their whole lives; especially, they kept obeying all the teachings of the Bible, even though they had this huge personal problem (1:6,7). It tells us that God sees us; he sees our struggles; he hears our prayers; and he still really does reward those who earnestly seek him (Heb11:6). In a larger sense, it’s people like Zechariah and Elizabeth that God still chooses to use to bring his grace to people all over the world.

Now in today’s passage God sends the angel Gabriel to a someone else, to announce another miracle son. It’s not just filler information; it’s another story about the kind of person God chooses to use. This time it’s not an old person, but a very young person; it’s actually a teenager, someone who had her whole life ahead of her. God uses very old people who have a lot of wisdom, deep character and life experiences, but God also uses very young people, including a young teenaged girl. God abruptly interrupts her beautiful young life with this radically different life path. And this young lady makes a really hard decision: she accepts God’s strange will for her. Today we want to learn how and why she made such a decision, and what it means to us. We also want to learn from the angel’s words about who Jesus is.

Let’s read verses 26,27. We notice several things here. First is the time. It’s “in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.” After many centuries of waiting, God’s set time to send the Messiah had fully come (Gal4:4). Next is the location. It’s “a town called Nazareth.” It was a small, unknown village in hills of Galilee with no more than 2,000 people. In other words, it was a highly unlikely place for something great to happen. Previously, Gabriel appeared in a grand place, in the Jerusalem temple. This time, of all places, God chooses to send him to this small village in the hills nobody had ever heard of before. Then we notice the people. Verse 27 says that Gabriel was sent to “a virgin.” The actual Greek word is “parthenon,” and it means a pure young woman, eligible for marriage. Zechariah was an elderly priest, but this was probably a teenaged girl. Then, as now, nobody would take a young teenaged girl very seriously. But of all people, God chose to send the angel Gabriel to her. Next, it says that she was “pledged to be married.” In their culture, girls were engaged as early as 12 years old. In that male-dominant society women didn’t have careers; girls were defined only in terms of who they married. This young lady, it says, was pledged to be married “to a man named Joseph.” It adds that he was “a descendant of David.” David had been Israel’s greatest king, so this Joseph was a very eligible, noble bachelor. Finally, we’re actually told the virgin’s name: “Mary.” At that time, women were not even counted in public records, much less had their names recorded anywhere. But Luke focuses the entire story on this young lady, Mary. It’s hard for us to appreciate how radical it was to elevate such a young woman to such an important place. An epic moment in history actually depended on her.

Let’s read verse 28. This, too, is kind of shocking. Why would such a teenaged girl be so “highly favored”? And why would the Lord be with her? God chose Zechariah and Elizabeth because of their exemplary, devout lives. But this young girl hadn’t even lived yet to have a good record to deserve being chosen or favored. Up to this point, Mary was just an ordinary, small-town girl, living a very ordinary girl’s life. She doesn’t seem to have had any great ambitions; she must’ve had the same simple hopes and dreams most girls have: to meet a nice guy who would really love her and provide for her, and have a happy life with him, in a cute little house she could decorate, making good meals and raising sweet little children of their own. Obviously God had other plans. God was with her not just to comfort her; God had been with her, throughout her childhood, protecting and guiding her, because he wanted to use her.

Let’s read verse 29. An angel appearing to her was a supernatural experience. But it wasn’t so much the angel appearing that was troubling; it was the kind of greeting he gave her. He called her “highly favored” and said “the Lord is with you.” Mary sensed this was no ordinary greeting; she sensed that God was calling on her. And she was greatly troubled, it says. Why so greatly troubled, though? Probably it was because at this point in her life, engaged to be married to Joseph, she didn’t *want* God to call on her. She didn’t want her plans with Joseph to be interrupted. We all can relate to her in some way. When we’re about to experience some great personal joy in our lives, we don’t want anything or anyone to interfere with it. We can be afraid we might lose it.

Let’s read verse 30. The angel reassured Mary that there was nothing to be afraid of. Why not? It was because, the angel said, she had “found favor with God.” It sounds nice, but it’s not so simple to define what this means. It can mean that God had been watching her and liked her. In Greek the root word for “favor” here is “charis,” and it can be translated in several ways: it can mean that in God’s eyes “you’re beautiful” or “you’re graceful” or “you’re thankful.” But in this case it probably mainly means, “God wants to give you his grace.” Christians use the word often, but what is “grace,” really? Grace essentially means an undeserved gift. God’s grace is something we could never deserve or earn. God’s grace is totally one-sided, and it really can’t be explained. God’s grace is also **the** best gift and the most valuable treasure we could ever have. Have you ever thought about the question: “What do I want to be known for in life? What will people remember about me? What will my life’s legacy be?” Will people say, “He worked so hard” or “She was so kind and giving.” Those are admirable. But maybe the best thing to be known for is, “He or she received God’s grace.” This is what Mary, the mother of Jesus, is known for: she received the grace of God.

But there’s more to God’s grace than just receiving an undeserved gift or treasure. Let’s read verse 31. God’s special favor to Mary was to use her to be the mother of Jesus. And her son would be no ordinary person. Let’s read verses 32,33. We notice several things here. First it says he would be “great.” Back in verse 15 the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah that his son would be “great in the sight of the Lord.” Mary’s son no doubt would have this same kind of greatness. He wouldn’t have a great appearance or be great in status, wealth or human achievements; his greatness would come from his character, what was in his heart, which is what God is always looking at. But Mary’s son would be even greater than John. It says he “will be called the Son of the Most High.” He would not be merely Mary’s human son; he would be God’s Son. He would be more than a man; he would be the divine Son of God. Jesus would be great for many reasons—his genuine love for people, his profound teaching, his healing power, his courage to challenge corruption and hypocrisy. But what made Jesus **truly** great was that he was actually the one and only divine Son of God. It also says he would inherit David’s throne and reign over the house of Jacob forever; “his kingdom will never end.” This means Mary’s son would be Israel’s long-awaited, promised Messiah. How many Jewish mothers had a kind of delusion that their son would be the Messiah? But in young Mary’s case, it would actually be true.

So how does Mary respond to this news? Let’s read verse 34. Mary knew full well that she wasn’t married yet. Maybe she was hoping this prophecy about her son would be fulfilled *after* she married Joseph. But again, God had other plans. Let’s read verse 35. Mary’s son would not be conceived in the ordinary way, by a man. He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. In this way he would be “the holy one” and “the Son of God.” This was probably the hardest part of the angel’s news to Mary, to have a baby without being married. In her society it would mean disgrace. It’s interesting. In Elizabeth’s life, God’s favor took away her disgrace among the people. But in Mary’s life, God’s favor would bring her disgrace among the people. Mary would never be able to convince her fiancé Joseph that she got pregnant by the Holy Spirit, so it would likely mean losing Joseph and all the happy dreams that went with marrying him. It would likely mean never being able to marry again. It would mean making her parents very unhappy and dishonoring her family. It would mean living a very different life than she had ever conceived of. It meant giving up a lot.

But the angel didn’t speak to any of this; he continued to address Mary’s question, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Let’s read verse 36. He’s talking about the amazing example of Elizabeth, who happened to be Mary’s elderly relative. By the sixth month of her pregnancy Elizabeth had come out of seclusion. Everybody who knew about her marveled at the fact that this old lady had become pregnant. And she no doubt had been telling everybody, “The Lord has done this for me.” News of this had evidently reached Mary’s ears, so the angel reminded her through this that God can do anything. God can enable an elderly woman to become pregnant. God can enable a young lady to become pregnant without a man. Then the angel spoke a strong conclusion to Mary. Let’s read verse 37. This meant that his words were God’s words. God’s words always come true. So we should believe them. This was the best way to help Mary make her decision: to do it based on the word of God.

We all make decisions in many ways. We decide based on our preferences and tastes, our conveniences. Sometimes we decide based on our prejudices. Sometimes we decide recklessly, without thinking, or out of some kind of rebellion. Sometimes we decide based on our fears. Sometimes we decide based on our overpowering desires and emotions. Sometimes we decide based on lots and lots of calculating. But we make the best choices if we make a decision based on God’s word.

How did Mary respond? Let’s read verse 38. It’s stunning that she made her decision so quickly. It didn’t take weeks and weeks of fasting and praying. Actually, in this case there seems to have been no time for that. When she heard what the angel said, she just accepted his word, simply. She said, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” She didn’t let her worries or feelings get in the way; she just held onto God’s word she heard through the angel. And her gut reaction to God’s request of her is remarkable. She **first** says, “I am the Lord’s servant.” Where did this young teenage girl get *that* idea? She, just like the Jewish boys around her, had been immersed in the Bible from her childhood. She had been to the local synagogue listening and learning how to believe in God and how to pray. She had been learning from all the people of faith in her community the basic attitude God’s people should have towards him. She was ready to do anything God asked of her, like a good servant. She was ready to obey him. We might expect this of an older, more mature woman. But it seems rare for a young teenaged girl to have this kind of attitude. Usually the young teenage years are the time of rebellion. They can be rebellious to everything, unconditionally, not because things are bad, but just for the sake of being rebellious. Through rebellion young people are trying to find their own identity, separate from their parents or anybody else. But Mary found her identity in being the Lord’s servant. At her core, to her it was who she really was. Serving God, to Mary, was the best thing to do in life. Many cynical people might laugh at her as being too square or a dummy. But to God, her willingness to serve him, to dedicate her life to being useful to him, was so precious. We live in a very “me-centered” culture. We can learn much from Mary, who said, “I am the Lord’s servant.”

Mary’s decision wouldn’t totally ruin her life. Joseph ends up protecting her and the baby and marrying her. She goes on to have more children with him. But she would always have to bear her townspeople’s glances at her and snide attitudes, considering her “too weak to wait” or maybe even being immoral with some mystery guy other than Joseph. On top of that, seeing what would ultimately happen to her son Jesus would be so painful for her as a mother. Mary would one day have to watch him being crucified in disgrace and great pain. What Mary sacrificed and went through in order to serve the Lord brought God’s grace into this world. We shouldn’t pray to her or worship her. But according to Luke, we certainly should stop to appreciate and learn from what she did.

We learn in today’s passage several things. First we learned about God. God considers even young teenagers as crucial people, if they have the faith to obey him. God usually works in ways that contradict our own happy plans. But God’s plans and God’s ways are best. God can do totally impossible things. God’s words always come true. And God bestows on people his favor, his grace. Receiving God’s grace means not just receiving his special love and approval, but also being used by him. We also learn today from Mary’s obedience. How could she obey God like this? Her obedience came from her love for God. She loved God more than she loved herself. Finally, we learned that Jesus is God’s Son, the promised Messiah, and his kingdom will never end. May God help us open our hearts to Jesus this Christmas. And may God show us how to truly love and obey him in our lives, no matter what it may cost.