

Ordinary People and an Ordinary Name

December 22, 2002 ~ Fourth Sunday of Advent

Background Study

Scripture Passage – Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

An Ordinary Girl Receives an Extraordinary Announcement

The simple, holy dignity of Luke's gospel is evident throughout this passage and it will repay a slow reading! Luke opens his Gospel (Luke 1:5-25) by telling us how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, an old priest going about his daily duties, and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, to be named John, who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." This child would grow to be John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant (see v. 26 above), her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or 15 at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow!

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, probably even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. But Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her! Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne! Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The word "overshadow" (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all.

The Gospel of Luke

This Gospel is the first volume of Luke's history of Jesus and the early church. The second volume of his work is the Book of Acts. Together, they comprise about 25% of the New Testament! Luke was the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. His gospel was written to tell all the world – Roman, Greek, Jewish, and so on – that Jesus is the savior of everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Here is one example. In Matthew's Gospel (written for a Jewish audience), Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy back to King David. However, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, the father of all humankind.

Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children. Finally, Gabriel reminds Mary that “nothing will be impossible with God.” Alan Culpepper, in his commentary on Luke, draws our attention to the fact that Gabriel’s reminder is in the future tense. It echoes Jesus’ later declaration, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn’t visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God’s story to move forward. We celebrate Advent and Christmas each year because ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph obeyed God!

The Name of Jesus

Though we often take names for granted (what are the popular baby names this year?!), in the Bible, names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. God’s revealing of his name to Moses was a momentous event in the story of the exodus (Exodus 3:13-15). Sometimes, God would even change a person’s name to convey a new meaning, such as changing Abram’s name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5).

Mary is told that her baby’s name is to be Jesus. “Jesus” is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning “Yahweh [God’s name] is salvation.” Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

In Aramaic, the language probably spoken by Jesus, his name would have been Jeshua. This was a very ordinary name in Jesus’ day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person.

Getting these studies on-line & early!

These studies are available at least a week before the sermon is preached. If you would like to get them early, you can get them on-line. There are two ways:

1. You can download a copy at the new website for the St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning by going to www.standrewccl.org. Simply click on the button, Sermon Background Studies, and you’ll be taken to the right page.
2. The studies are also distributed by e-mail. To join the e-mail distribution list, simply send an e-mail to:
sa_studies-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

You can find more info at the Center’s website.

The Center’s website also has information on the Bible Academy session that begins Jan 13. You can download the registration booklet and even register on-line. You’ll also find materials for a number of the classes offered by the Academy, as well as recommended links for Bible study and even book recommendations!

his name would have been Jeshua. This was a very ordinary name in Jesus’ day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called “the Son of the Most High,” a striking title, and that he will sit on David’s throne, where he will reign over God’s people (the “House of Jacob”) forever. Indeed, Jesus’ “kingdom will have no end.” All this is in keeping with promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Luke could not be more proclaiming that Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God’s kingdom on earth.

Christmas Eve

The scripture passage for Christmas Eve will be Luke’s Christmas story (2:1-20). In the study, we’ll try to read this familiar story with fresh eyes and hear the extraordinary announcement made to a few most ordinary shepherds.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Samuel 1:1-28 Hannah, who is unable to have children, prays to God for a child. God grants her petition. Her son will be the prophet Samuel.</p>	<p>Day 2 2 Samuel 7:4-17 God makes a promise to David about David's name and throne.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 1:5-25 The angel Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 1:39-56 Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth.</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 1:57-80 John the Baptist is born.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In Luke's narrative, one can't help being struck by the ordinary sorts of people chosen by God to play most extraordinary roles in human history. Are we prepared for the extraordinary work God wants to do in our lives? Are we prepared to hear God when he asks us to undertake something extraordinary, or seemingly impossible, in the furtherance of his kingdom?
2. Luke tells us that Mary was "favored" by God. But Alan Culpepper points out that being favored meant that Mary would become pregnant and bear a child out of wedlock - a child destined to die a shameful and horrible death on a Roman cross. You can bet that many of Mary's townspeople weren't very understanding of her condition! I suspect that God's favor towards us might not always conform to what we think favor ought to look like. Mary was called to be obedient and she obeyed. We are called to be obedient. Do we obey? Do we see the power that lies in being obedient to God? Does our obedience ever cost us anything? Do we think that God's favor - God's grace! - comes cheaply?
3. Angels figure prominently in the birth stories of John and Jesus. The word "angel" is from the Greek work *aggelos*, "messenger." Do you believe in angels? What role do you think angels play in your life?