

Fourth Sunday in Advent

NOW, ABOUT THIS CHILD

Luke 1:26-38

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Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

In 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. 31 And 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 the Son of God. 36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this was 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.

Author's Note: It may help us focus on what is happening in this text by reviewing Raymond Brown's commentary, The Birth of the

Messiah, pages 286-319 and work through the questions and doubts of the central characters of Advent: Zechariah and Mary, involving John and Jesus; also see F. W. Danker's Jesus and the New Age. (Brown references Danker in his bibliography for the Luke narrative, pages 6-41.)

DIAGNOSIS: Human Incredibility about Divine Things

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Troubled

Are other descriptions applicable? Confronted by a divine presence like Gabriel, meaning "Man of God" who wouldn't be "startled," "perplexed," "troubled" (v. 29)? Here is this young teen and virgin, promised by betrothal to a man named Joseph. She is likely 12 to 16 years old (!) and receives this angelic visitor! It makes her (and us) nervous about what it all might mean. What seemed to "trouble her" was that this mysterious messenger (angel) would "greet her" as graced with a blessing from the Lord. Why these "encouraging words" up front? Was the proportion of encouragement meant to prepare her for the enormity of God's divine "mission impossible"? Was Mary about to be burdened by a divine calling she neither understood nor could face?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Afraid

So who wouldn't be "afraid?" Who is this luminous presence? A mysterious intruder who means trouble for her? But then he mentions the Lord. But that makes her (and us in any similar situation) to be startled, perplexed, troubled, and now, also nervous and afraid. What might God want with us? Divine visits are scary. Who can understand them? Isn't that something like "we cannot by our own reason or strength believe" and so we become fearful rather than "faith-full," confident, or comfortable? This situation begins to sound like the "word of

the Lord” assigning Jonah his loathsome mission. Remember? He was full of angst (worry and consternation), eager, not for the mission but to take the next boat out of town to get away from “the word of the Lord.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Impossible!*

What’s this about “conceiving” a special baby in her womb? She’s still a teenager and virgin! How can this be? She has not “known a man.” Human science and experience demand that there must be sexual union to produce an offspring. This word to Mary from the Lord is incredible and, from what we know, impossible. We are at odds with God because God is promising an impossible thing! We are at a “dead end.” It is a curious thing that when Zechariah asked the same question because of his old age, he was accused of unbelief and silenced until it came to pass. Mary escapes what could have been a similar painful penalty. She was not accused of “unbelief” when she asked the same question; Luther suggests that “no conception would be possible unless” Mary believed! But at this point we are still waiting for that word of comfort and promise, divine intervention to overcome human misgivings, doubts, and an empty womb. Without that promise we are barren of all hope.

Prognosis: God’s Credibility about Divine Things

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God’s Possibility*

Check it out with Abraham and Sarah. Check it out with “your relative Elizabeth in her old age” for “nothing shall be impossible with God.” All the promises of God are “Yes” in Christ Jesus. “The Holy Spirit will overshadow you”; this term is used again only at the Transfiguration in the gospels. It suggests mystery, but more, “that Jesus is the product of a unique demonstration of God’s mighty power” (Danker), but also one “missioned” for suffering and death that will bless all humankind. It calls for worship, not explanations. “You will

name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give him the throne of his ancestor David." So what's the big deal here? In Christ, God has come to be with us and for us as one of us. Not only do we find in him a brother kin to our earthly condition, but one who is "designated Son of God in power according to the Holy Spirit (Spirit of Holiness) as of resurrection from (of) the dead" (Romans 1:3-4). Jesus, born to be King, will be enthroned forever through death and resurrection. Might we suggest that the phrase, "the child will be born holy" (v. 35), does not refer to mere sinlessness here, but one who has been consecrated to God for a mission impossible among earthlings!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Reward of Faith*

St. Augustine is credited with the saying, "Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand." How about that! While it seems that the angel provides a definitive "explanation" regarding "overshadowing," the term is not linked to any form of sexuality, and therefore "rationality," but God's creative power as in the "Spirit's overshadowing of creation, hovering over "a void" (Genesis 1), not unlike an empty womb. The response to such words of promise is "faith" from which comes understanding and worship. Besides all that, faith (hearing, obedience) drives out fear, and gives us its promise.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) : *Be Joyful and Confident with Song*

"Let it be according to your word." Let it be! (Let it be! Wasn't that a line in a folk song about Mary? And countless other songs attest to such trust spoken and sung: "Rise, shine you people, Christ the Lord has entered our human story; God in Him is centered." "Sing of Mary, pure and lowly, virgin mother, wise and mild; Sing of God's own Son most holy, who became her

little child...Word made flesh, our very brother, takes our nature by his birth.") The Lord we encounter in this gracious promise takes on a new shine as we share and sing that word with joy and confidence this season. "Be born in us today," we sing and pray. The Davidic promise from Samuel for an Eternal Home, anticipated in the angel's message and received by Mary, is realized in the Christmas Child of flesh and blood.