

December 8, 2019 The Details Luke 1:26-38

The Christmas story is told to us, in detail, by Matthew and by Luke. To the modern mind, I have no doubt Luke is to some degree, more appreciated than is Matthew. For one thing, Matthew's Gospel account continually references the fulfilment of prophecy in the Old Testament, and is much more interesting in terms of Jewish culture. We come to the Gospel accounts with Gentile (non-Jewish) interests. Luke, like his friend Paul, speaks to us with a giftedness of sensitivity that just impresses us because of who we are. And besides Luke is a doctor, a healer, a man of medicine, to some degree a scientific man. Luke has a tendency to impress us with the way he approaches questions, and the way he seeks answers to those questions. He is a literate explainer.

That Luke cannot tell us this story, or describe Mary's experience without reference to angels tells us something. And the first detail Luke shares with us is that this is a story which assumes you understand, that finding meaning to the biggest questions about life, and our own lives, is a hopeless quest, unless you begin at this point. The One Almighty God is real. HE created us, and no matter what we have done, HE has never stopped loving us, and never stopped trying to be part of our lives. The assumption Luke demands we accept if we are going to hear and understand something of the story of Jesus, is that this is how it begins: "God sent the

angel Gabriel, to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged in marriage to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.”

And even though we are Gentiles, not Jewish, we are swept into the unfolding story about our being saved from sin, by being told, by a doctor with an analytical mind, who looks for causes and effects, that the chief ingredient in this matter is faith. Faith grasps the illogical possibility, that God is, and God cares. Fiction writers continually tell us there is something magical about this time of year. What they mean is what Luke declares. It takes faith to see the importance of the baby born in Bethlehem. It takes a measure of faith to grasp that God loves you, even you, me even me. Here is the first detail of the history of Jesus: God sent an angel to Nazareth in Galilee. And by the way, his name was Gabriel. And the person he came to see was a virgin, named Mary.

That is a lot to drink in, in one swallow. Luke says, indeed it is. This story requires faith, not a lot, but faith nonetheless. This history begins when God sends Gabriel to a young woman who has never been with a man, and she was living in Nazareth and wedding plans had been made by the family of Joseph, a descendant of David the King. How in the world does Luke know the name of the angel? How does he know it is Gabriel that is sent to talk to Mary?

Luke was a doctor, a man of medicine in that culture in that time. And for the record, Luke's account of the

life and ministry of Jesus includes more stories about women than any other book in the Bible. They are the mothers of sick children. They nurse husbands and relatives who are seriously ill. Luke clearly knew Mary the mother of Jesus and she is one of the sources for his carefully researched account. Let this thought send a shiver down your back. Luke never even thought to tell us one of the things he has come to believe. One of the things Mary obviously said to the angel who confronted her in Nazareth is in the form of a question. Who are you? What are you? What's your name? It is pretty obvious that she shared some of those things she kept in her heart with Luke the doctor, when he is writing to Theophilus and wants to know the whole story. I asked him who he was, and he said he was an angel sent by God and his name was Gabriel.

By the way, the word angel literally means messenger of God. Gabriel begins the conversation with Mary by saying to her, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you." In fact the KJV says Gabriel said, "You are highly favoured, the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women." Each one of those details is significant. What Gabriel tells her is that God is with her. That she has been chosen by God for something very special. That she is as a woman blessed and will be recognized as one very special woman. I want to simply make the observation that that is exactly what has happened over time. We as believers have recognized Mary. Whether it is the miracle of Cana, water into wine, or following Jesus because she followed HIM even as the disciples struggled

with following HIM. And she was consistently there as crucifixion and death came closer and closer in time to her son. And she was there on Easter morning, one of the first to see the risen Lord. And then the one reliable source for so much of the material relevant to what we are even now celebrating....the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

I love this detail. Verse 29: “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” Gabriel has not got to the earth shaking details of his message for her but Mary is hearing what she has heard and is getting nervous about this whole experience with an angel of God sent to talk to her. She anticipates that the heroes of her faith who have walked with God as on a mission heaven sent, have often had to pay a price for it in pain, anguish and suffering. For anyone who has found some moments of the faith journey hard to cope with...here is a glimpse of what it is like to be visited by Gabriel. She can feel the heat of the light of God breaking on her destiny. It is not ecstasy, and it is not easy. She is “greatly troubled” and she has not yet heard the half of it.

Gabriel once again says to her that she has found favour with God. He calls her to set aside her fears, which means she already has fears.

And now comes the impact of her having been chosen. She will have a child, not just any child, but Jesus. He will be called Son of the Most High. God’s Son. He will occupy

the throne of David by the express will of God HIMSELF. His Kingship will be eternal, in time and yet beyond time.

Detail. She believes Gabriel because she is standing before him. She has gotten over that faith hurdle, but...she understands how babies are made. And she has not been with a man. And Gabriel explains the power of God is going to touch her and as a result the child she will carry and bring into the world will be, and will be called the Son of God.

Detail. What Mary tells Luke, that Gabriel told her, is that this pregnancy will be unique. One of a kind. Of God. By God. For God. The one help that Gabriel offers Mary who is struggling to understand and make sense of what is happening to her, is that her relative, Elizabeth, an old woman who never had children in her youth is even now 6 months along in pregnancy with a baby who will become John the Baptist. It is Gabriel who touches Mary's soul and ours with a simple profound reality about possibilities. "Nothing is impossible with God." What those words mean is that we will never understand what the word miraculous means until we accept that Mary was a virgin and then by heaven's will and for God's redeeming purposes, she was expecting the baby Jesus. "Nothing is impossible with God." It is not about understanding, it is about accepting. God is. We are HIS beloved children. The impossible is possible because God is God. Luke had seen enough in Jesus ministry to accept that and testify to it. Mary saw enough in what occurred to accept what occurred. The truth.

Detail. Mary accepted that what Gabriel said would happen, would happen, and it did. She acknowledged something that was not entirely new for her. She had been a servant of God. She was a woman who believed. She accepted that she could take the next step. “May it be to me as you have said.” Her destiny is that she would be for all time, the mother of Jesus.

Detail. Gabriel left her. She is alone in the world and pregnant. Detail. No one believed her. Not even Joseph. As we make this journey into Advent and toward Christmas. We sing carols in praise of God. Mary also sang a song. “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” She is remarkable. Her son is a miracle. God redeems. And we celebrate Christmas in 16 days. Let us pray.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty;

Fill us with joy in your presence when we are in danger of being empty. Feed our faith when we cry out to you. Open our eyes as you opened the eyes of the shepherds and the wisemen who watched the stars. Turn our gaze to Bethlehem. Turn our hearts toward Mary and Joseph and the baby who became the man Jesus. Fill us with hope in HIM. Amen

