

The Announcement of Jesus' Birth (Luke 1:26-38)

Sunday school April 17, 2016

I want to call your attention this morning to **READ Luke 1:26-38**. When I read this text, the first thing that strikes me is the similarity between this text and the one we just studied, the announcement of John the Baptist's birth. Both accounts start with a date/time stamp. Verse 5 told us that the announcement of John's birth occurred "in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea." Verse 26 tells us that this announcement comes "in the sixth month." It's not explicitly said here, but he means the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy. Verse 24 tells us she hid herself 5 months, so this would be right after she revealed herself to everyone at Jerusalem as being pregnant. So we see another example of the order, the scientific precision, that characterizes Luke's gospel.

Another similarity: both messages are delivered by the angel Gabriel, as stated in verse 19 and 26. Both encounters spark fear in the mind of the recipient. Verse 12 tells us that Zacharias was troubled, and fear fell upon him. Verse 30 tells us that Mary was "troubled at his saying." So Zacharias and Mary have the same initial responses. Both sons are given names by God. In verse 13, Zacharias is instructed to name his son John, which as I mentioned before translates to "God is gracious." In verse 31, Mary is instructed to name hers Jesus, which translates to "the Lord saves." God giving a son a name is unusual in scripture, but both of these sons are named. It is said of both sons that they will be great. Verse 15 says that John will "be great in the sight of the Lord." Verse 32 says of Jesus, "He shall be great." When there are so many similarities, you should note the similarities, but the things you really need to pay attention to are the differences. Howard and I drive very similar cars. They are both silver colored. They have the same basic shape. They are both 4-door sedans. But if I try to use my key to get in his car (which I almost did once a few months ago), it's not going to open. So you have to really pay attention to the differences. So I have spent the past 5 minutes summarizing the similarities; we will spend the rest of the hour studying the differences.

Transition: So let me HAND OUT OUTLINES. The first difference is...

I. Location (Galilee vs. Jerusalem) READ v. 26 The vision to Zacharias took place in the temple in Jerusalem, the center and most important place on the earth from a Jewish perspective. Galilee, on the other hand, is out in the boondocks, as we might say in this part of the world. Moreover, Nazareth, even though it is called a city, is a very small insignificant city. Jerusalem is all over the Old Testament. Nazareth is not even mentioned in the Old Testament, not even once. So in our part of the world, if Jerusalem was Anderson, Nazareth would be Antreville, that little town without even a traffic light down SR 28. So Jerusalem was the center of the world; Nazareth was out in the boondocks.

Also, Nazareth was despised by the Jews. In John chapter 1, when Philip finds Nathanael and says, “we’ve found the Messiah: it’s Jesus of Nazareth,” you remember Nathanael’s response: “Can any good thing come from Nazareth?” It’s kind of the way we in this part of the country view those pompous liberal northeasterners. We recognize they’re Americans, but we don’t agree with them on much and we don’t like their style. So we kind of wish they weren’t Americans. That’s the way the Jews viewed people from Galilee: it’s kind of in Israel, but we don’t agree with them on much, and we kind of wish it wasn’t. So Gabriel appears in Jerusalem to a priest, a spiritual leader of Israel, in the center of the Jews’ world. Then he appears to a peasant girl in the middle of nowhere. This reminds us that God works everywhere. He works here in the United States. He works in southeast Asia. He works in China. He works wherever He has people who will serve Him. Isn’t it great to serve a God that is God everywhere? It doesn’t matter where you’re from, what matters is you follow the Lord. Both Zacharias/Elisabeth and Mary were faithful servants of the Lord, so God is able to use them to accomplish His work regardless of their location.

Transition: Next difference,...

II. Situation (Old vs. Virgin) READ v. 27 We were told in the previous text that Zacharias and Elisabeth were old, well-stricken in years. It doesn’t tell us how old; it just says they were old. Mary, on the other hand, was probably very young. It doesn’t tell us her age (no reasonable person would EVER give a woman’s age), but it does tell us she was “espoused.” According to Jewish custom at the time, the usual age for a woman to be espoused would typically be only 12 or 13 years old. So that’s probably about how old Mary was when she received this vision. As a side note and personal opinion, I think many of the artist renderings of the nativity scene make Mary and Joseph look much too old. Through my eyes, they usually look like a married couple in their 20’s or 30’s. In fact, Mary probably would have been only 13 or 14 years old when she gave birth to Jesus. That’s my one art reference for the year.

So it seems impossible for Elisabeth to give birth due to her old age (as we mentioned a couple of weeks ago), but Mary giving birth has in some sense the opposite impossibility. Three times this text clearly tells us that Mary was a virgin: twice here in v. 27, and again down in verse 34. **READ v. 34** The Greek word translated virgin is *parthenon*, and it’s not a generic word with many meanings. It is a technical term with the precise meaning that you think it has: a sexual virgin. So you can’t believe in a literal reading of the Bible, that God’s word is true and inerrant, and not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. Those two positions are incompatible. To reinforce that, keep a finger here and flip back to the other detailed account of Jesus’ birth, Matthew chapter 1. I will make some comments as we read.

- **v. 18:** Both the Matthew and Luke accounts tell us that Mary and Joseph were espoused at the time these events took place. Some translations use the word “engaged.” That may be OK, but you need to understand that being espoused in their time was very different from we think of as being engaged today. In particular, it was much more binding. If you were espoused, you were married in almost every respect. It was the same as being married except 1) you had not gone through the formal ceremony, and 2) you hadn’t consummated. You couldn’t just break off an espousal like you can an engagement. If you want to become unespoused, there is a formal legal proceeding you had to go through similar to a divorce proceeding. Then it is emphasized that this was “before they had come together.” That’s contained in the idea of an espousal, so the repetition of that point is for emphasis. So we see the same emphasis here (that Mary was a virgin) as we did in Luke 1. Now keep reading.
- **v. 19** This putting her away refers to the formal legal process of breaking an espousal as provided in the Jewish law. It is described in detail in Deut. 22:23-24. They hadn’t consummated their marriage yet, but she becomes pregnant. That would normally be a problem, and Joseph thinks about the normal solution, but he’s stopped. Look at verses 20 and 21.
- **v. 20-21** It’s interesting that this vision an angel gives to Joseph is not recorded in Luke. In Luke’s narrative, Joseph is there, but he’s not prominent. He’s mentioned once in verse 27, where it is said that he is of the house of David for reasons we will get to in a few minutes, and then he doesn’t appear again until Luke chapter 2. This is the first time in the gospel of Luke you start to see Luke’s emphasis on Jesus as the Son of Man, His humanity. Mary was Jesus’ human mother. Joseph was not Jesus’ human father. He didn’t have a human father. So the angel here intercedes to Joseph on Mary’s behalf: don’t break off the espousal, there’s a work of God going on here. Now let’s read the rest of the text.
- **v. 22-23** Again, Matthew says Mary was a virgin. That’s a quote of Isaiah 7, and there’s an interesting issue there about how Matthew quotes the Old Testament that I don’t want to get sidetracked on because we are studying Luke and not Matthew, but Matthew clearly says, “a virgin shall be with child.” Finish the chapter...
- **v. 24-25** Again, verse 25 says “he knew her not.”

So in the two birth accounts it tells us clearly a total of 6 times, 3 in Luke and 3 in Matthew, that Mary was a virgin when she conceived. That’s in some sense the opposite of Elisabeth, who was well stricken in years.

Transition: Back in Luke, the next difference is...

III. Angel's Greeting (heard prayer vs. divine favor) READ v. 28-30 When Gabriel appears to Zacharias, he starts out, "fear not, for thy prayer is heard." That doesn't make sense in this case: Mary probably had not been praying to conceive as a virgin. The greeting to Mary is a little more elaborate, so let's go phrase by phrase.

IIIA. Hail=rejoice It doesn't just mean listen up or fear not, it means rejoice. The Latin word for hail is *ave*, and this is where some other denominations get the phrase *ave Maria*, or hail Mary. The next phrase,

IIIB. Highly Favored=received much grace It's interesting that the Greek translated "highly favored" here and also down in verse 30 appears only 1 other time in the New Testament, and it's kind of an odd place in the sense that it has nothing to do with the virgin birth. We studied it about a year and a half ago; it's Eph. 1:6: "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved." The word accepted there is the same word translated highly favored here. As I commented back when we studied that text and as the context in Ephesians 1 suggests, it carries the idea of receiving God's grace. I sometimes said, "He has begraced us." So when Gabriel says "you are highly favored" he means "you have received much grace." The last phrase,

IIIC. The Lord be with thee This phrase carries the idea of being divinely chosen for a special task. In Judges chapter 6, when God tells Gideon he will smite the Midianites and Gideon starts to give excuses, the Lord says, "Surely I will be with thee," meaning you are the one I have chosen for this task. In Mary's case, the task was to give birth to the Savior and Son of Man. Remember Jesus means "the Lord saves." Some of these phrases apply to Zacharias and Elisabeth too, but the angel doesn't explicitly give them to Zacharias. He does explicitly give them to Mary.

Transition: Next difference...

IV. Greatness Level Both parents are told that their sons will be great, but with Jesus a bunch of additional phrases are added that imply that Jesus will be greater. Let's look at them one at a time.

IVA. Son of the Highest READ v. 32a That idea is repeated at the end of verse 35, where it is said that He will be "called the Son of God." When we read these phrases today, the first thing that probably comes to mind is His deity. Jesus isn't just called the Son of God, He IS the Son of God and God the Son. So we often use these phrases to describe His deity. That idea is there, but a more direct connection is to the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

On at least two occasions a human king of Israel is referred to as the son of God. In II Samuel chapter 7, God tells David through the prophet Nathan regarding his son Solomon that “He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men:” Also, in Psalms 2:7 David writes, “I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” Luke tells us Joseph was of the house of David, so by calling Jesus the Son of the Highest and the Son of God he is pointing us in the direction that He will be the Messiah in the kingly line of David that was spoken of in the Old Testament.

Transition: That idea is continued with...

IVB. Eternal Reign READ v. 32b-33 In your outlines I gave you a bunch of references from Old Testament prophecies. We’re not going to read them, but they all refer to a kingdom of God that will never end. So when the angel says, “And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end,” the point is that this will be the Messiah that was prophesied in the Old Testament. That’s not said about John the Baptist, but it is about Jesus.

Transition: Siimilarly, while John the Baptist was conceived via natural processes so far as we know, Jesus would have a...

IVC. Miraculous Conception READ v. 34-37 Verse 34 is a request for an explanation, not a sign like Zacharias did. Normally not knowing a man would be an impediment to having a son. The explanation she gets tells us a little, but it doesn’t really answer all of our questions. As a physician, Luke would probably have been very interested in how a virgin physically could conceive. If he ever figured that out, he doesn’t really tell us. In particular, there is no language here that suggests any sexual activity, God having sex with Mary. These verses do, however, definitely imply divine activity. Verse 35 says “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee,” and verse 37 says “For with God nothing shall be impossible.” How does a virgin conceive? All it really tells us is: God made it happen. The result of that divine activity is that the baby will be a “holy thing,” as stated in verse 35. That is, He will be sinless. Jesus didn’t just live sinless, He was born sinless. So He was not under the curse of sin, which is death. So when He died, He didn’t have any of His own sin to die for, so He died for ours. The way we know He died for our sins as opposed to His own is His miraculous conception.

Transition: The explanation may or may not be satisfying to us, but apparently it was satisfying to Mary, and so the last difference is...

V. Response READ v. 38 Calling herself a handmaid acknowledges that she is a servant of God, as we all are. The other words convey acceptance and belief. That contrasts with Zacharias' response, which Gabriel characterized as unbelief.

Conclusion

As a final thought on this text, the thing that probably strikes me the most is the relationship this young girl Mary had with God. God sends an angel out to the boondocks to find her. He intercedes with her espoused husband on her behalf when she starts to show. He calls her highly favored, much begraced, just as we are called accepted in the beloved. He promises her great miraculous things, and her response is one of faith: be it according to thy word. I hope I have that same kind of relationship with God, and I hope you do to. So that when I read a promise to me in His word, my response will be "be it according to thy word."