

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS ACCORDING TO LUKE (PART 3) – MARY AND JESUS

SUNDAY DECEMBER 13TH, 2009

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LADNER UNITED CHURCH – 0900 AND 1100HRS

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Luke 1

26 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, favoured 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 favour 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 for ever, 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.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be^{*} a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary^{*} said,
 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

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We are continuing to work through the First Christmas Story – looking at it in its historical context – the First Century Palestine of Jesus under the domination of Rome...

putting aside those questions of did it happen exactly this way or not...and gazing through the lenses of parable...

A story that has profound meaning for us beyond its factual accuracy...

This is our second week on Luke Chapter 1 and next week and on Christmas Eve – through our Children's pageant and through Christmas Eve...we arrive at the actual birth...

Last week we read the parallel or twin story to last week's story of Elizabeth and Zechariah...the parents of John the Baptist...

A brief recap: Zechariah – a priest of the tribe of Arron who lives in the hill country with his wife Elizabeth...are elderly and childless – a source of shame in those days for Elizabeth – while serving with the other priest on his two week shift in the temple- Zechariah is chosen by lot to be the one who goes into the holy of holies – the inner sanctum to lay incense on the altar and make prayers for the people of Israel – great honor – while there – the Angel Gabriel tells him he and Elizabeth will have a son – to be named John – who will in the prophetic tradition of Israel – the one who points towards the anticipated Messiah – he is amazed and fearful as the people of Israel have been under the thumb of foreign oppressors and without hope for 500 years – this is the first time in that period that God has spoken in the temple...he is struck dumb for doubting – goes home and Elizabeth conceives and 9 months later when John is born he gets his voice back and sings what we now call the Benedictus...

Parallel to that story is this week's lesson:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy – God sends...

Let's stop there for a moment – that's important for the whole understanding...this is not a story about what people do – it's a story about what God has done and is doing through people...

on stage are the various actors in this drama as we meet them...but its God who is the creator and the director...it is what God is doing through or despite the human characters that is Luke's emphasis

Gabriel comes to Mary...to the town of Nazareth – called Galilee

Mary is a virgin – she is betrothed – promised by arranged marriage to a man whose name is Joseph – directly descended from the Great King David

Gabriel speaks and lays out God's plan

God is with her

She is favored

She is not be afraid and to know that she has found "favor" with God and she will conceive and bear a son named Jesus

Who will be great?

The Son of the Most High, the Son of God

And he will inherit the throne of his ancestor David – reigning over the House of Israel and of his reign there will be no end – it will continue for ever...

Gabriel informs Mary of the Elizabeth's conception...

And when she asks how she will conceive as she has never had sex with anyone – Gabriel says the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High will overshadow her...

Gabriel's last words are "Nothing is impossible with God" and Mary surrenders herself to God's will as God's servant and accepts the mission placed upon her...exactly like Abraham and Sarah do...

Finding herself pregnant...

Mary "sets out with haste" – in other words gets out of town quickly because everyone is gossiping

To a Judean town in the hill country to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah...this is one of the most beautiful and intimate moments in scripture....

Upon entering the house – the child John in Elizabeth’s womb leaps

And Elizabeth – filled with the Holy Spirit proclaims a blessing upon Mary and the baby Jesus in her womb

To which Mary responds with a song we called the Magnificat – based on the Latin translation of the word magnifies in the first line...

Rife with symbolism for the reader of Luke’s day – 85-90 AD – at least 50 years plus after Jesus’ death and resurrection...and set against the backdrop of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 ad – a kind of ancient 9-11 moment...

John is conceived first by Elizabeth and Zechariah...in their old age – and this conception of two people in old age establishes them in the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, of Hannah and various other women in the Hebrew Scriptures who through the power of God conceive in their old age...

There is continuity so people know that this is YHWH’s doing – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...

But John we know is to be a prophet and the one who points to the Messiah – he is not the Messiah...

In the early church after Jesus’ resurrection – there was competition between the disciples of Jesus and John as to who was the Messiah (this would be the early Christian church)

How does Luke differentiate but not separate John and Jesus for his readers in the future?

John is a prophet – he is like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the other great servants/prophets of Israel

His conception is miraculous...

And Jesus

Well – he is from the House of David

His conception is miraculous – but different – Mary is a virgin – she is young and this is the work of the Holy Spirit – and no husband is involved (as it was with Zechariah and Elizabeth)

And John – conceived first – when he first meets Jesus – womb to womb – jumps – turns in the womb – worships and points even then to Jesus’ superiority

They are both of God – but John points to Jesus as the Messiah – even in utero...and his rolling in the womb is an act of John worshipping or submitting to Jesus

And remember we suggested that the birth stories are an overture to Luke’s larger story of Luke – Acts...

Pointing right at the beginning to the one who is the Messiah...

With John’s death early in the Gospels – the time of the Old Testament ends and with Jesus’

Life, death and resurrection – the New Testament begins...

Now

Luke story of the First Christmas Story is really the story through Mary’s eyes... (Mary is mentioned 11 times and Joseph 3)

Mathew is the story of the First Christmas through Joseph’s eyes (Joseph is mentioned 8 times and Mary 3)

For Matthew the conception happens at Bethlehem and at Nazareth for Luke...

But other than that the stories are parallel

(The First Christmas – Borg and Crossan)

This they have in common:

Mary was engaged to Joseph

Mary conceived while a virgin

Mary conceived by God’s Holy Spirit

Jesus was named by God

Jesus was to “save” or “savior”

Jesus was the Davidic Messiah

Jesus was born at David’s city of Bethlehem

Jesus was born under Herod the Great

Mary, Joseph and Jesus live in Nazareth...

There's another ranking happening in this story with the images of divine conception beyond putting John in his place as a prophet who is not the Messiah but who points the way...

In the Greco and Roman tradition...

A predestined child is conceived by divine intercourse with a human being – one human and one a God

Octavian – the future Roman Emperor – Augustus (God) whose parents were Atia and Octavius...

After his ascension – a propaganda myth would be developed looking backward to give his story this overlay of divine conception...

well...Jesus as the New King – as I said a few weeks back – in these early chapters being given all of the titles attributed to the Roman Emperor...

is not only divinely conceived...Mary remains a virgin before, during and after conception and that makes his divine conception different and greater than them all...

John – well divine conception – two aged parents conceive a child

Octavian's mother Atia – a human conceives a child through intercourse with a God

Mary conceives a child without actual intercourse from God and remains a virgin...

Jesus trumps all...he stands above them...

And Mary sings a song...and she sings a song because there are some moments in life that words can't adequately describe one's feelings, hopes, fears and thoughts – all a person can do is sing and so Mary sings a song...

And that's where I want to wrap up: because it's the song that sets the scene for Luke

That says what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus will accomplish...remember the overture...

The world Luke lives in (and the world where we live) looks something like this...

Imagine a triangle

On the top is Caesar Augustus – the Roman Emperor...

Below him (10-15% of the population) the Nobles – the Military – the Politicians

going to the bottom of the triangle...everyone else and their sole existence is to work hard to generate income for the purposes of paying taxes and tributes to keep the top small portion of the triangle living well and good – at the top of the triangle – there is nothing wrong, inappropriate or unjust about that...

So Caesar Augustus – orders a new census for his empire to see where and how taxation is increased...those orders go down through the bureaucracy...to Quirinus who orders that everyone goes to their hometown to be counted...

And Mary – pregnant with Jesus – goes to Bethlehem and Jesus is born...

Jesus who is about as low in the hierarchy as you can imagine...

His “father” a carpenter – though everyone knows Mary got pregnant before they were married...making Jesus someone born out of wedlock...

Mary – dirt poor – who flees to the hills to take refuge with Elizabeth because the rumors are flying...

As an illegitimate child – defined by virtue of the legal definition of his Jewish Culture...

Jesus is born and grows up in that large mass of marginalized and rejected

On the social scale – somewhere below gentile slaves and the despised trades like tanners and shepherds...and a little above Samaritans...

Marriage to a full blooded Jewish girl would not be an option for him...

Three people in the teeming masses of the Roman Empire – that’s as far away from power and prestige as you can get...

Yet Mary sings...

And she sings a song – “of freedom for those who in their poverty and wretchedness still believe God will make a way when there appears now to be no way.” (Mahoney)

And says because of her son...

Imagine that Jesus will – turn that pyramid upside down...collapsed it into a banquet table...

God through Jesus will:

Scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts

Bring down the powerful (Caesar and Herod – Rome and Jerusalem) from their throne

Fill up the hungry with good things – send the rich away empty

Help his Servant Israel – based on the covenantal promises God has made to Israel

God will be faithful...

We call that “incarnation” – God became flesh like us to save the world and to call us to be apart of that salvation...

For some strange reason – God

Seems to think you and I have to be apart of the salvation of the world by following Jesus

J L Richardson

“Jesus’ kingdom requires conflict with the powers because it is not a privatized individualized spiritualized and psychological zed message of inner peace and relationship with God...it’s ultimately about the transition of the world.”

In Jesus – the Shepherd King – descended from David’s line – the powers of death, destruction, sin and evil (symbolized for Luke in Caesar’s Rome and Herod’s Jerusalem)

Will be defeated in Jesus’ death and resurrection and a new reign of peace and justice will come to be...

Question

You are Mary

God seeks to be birth – to become incarnate through his Son Jesus Christ in you

How are you giving birth to Jesus in your life?

How in who you are and what you do and how you relate – here in the ordinary everydayness of your average life...

Is God with us made real...made flesh

Remember the kids – this little light of mine – I’m gonna let it shine

Challenge

It’s far easier to sing the syrupy songs of Christmas because they do not make such demands from us

easier to sing about Rudolph and Frosty and worship some kind of Santa Claus God who we believe will give us what we want if we are just good...

But that’s not the Jesus that Mary sings (sings) about and it’s not the good news of the Christ of Matthew and Luke’s Gospel...

- ❖ internalize the song of Mary into some kind of Jesus and me interior kind of relationship to get to heaven...not to say there is not a place for meditation, for healing, for prayer – but it can’t be simply internalized
- ❖ prosperity gospel – if you just love God enough – you will have acceptability, prosperity, comfort – if anything Mary’s life contradicts that false promise – life on this earth and with God is not the promise of a bed of roses – but rather the promise of God’s love with us in the realness of our life...

Like Mary’s song does such radical discipleship...

Like Mary wherever we go – whom ever we meet- we carry Jesus in us

Will you and I allow him to come to birth in us to others?

Meister Eckhart 14th century (quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor – Gospel Medicine)

“We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us.”

NB – much of the material in this sermon comes from Crossan/Borg – The First Christmas

