

Sermon Notes

Advent as Messianic Inception & Conception

Luke 1:26-38; Jerry Truex; December 18, 2011

A. Introduction

Today I am going to talk about the Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary. I will talk about the three main characters in this episode in Luke: Jesus, Mary, and God. I will try to convince you that the passage is not so much about Mary's virginal conception as much as it is about the messianic inception. With that messianic inception, Mary is presented as the ideal believer to imitate, because she births the messianic hope.

B. Messianic Inception/Conception

Luke 1:26-38. ⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin [Gk. parthenos] engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The 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. ³² He 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin [lit. "since I do not know a man]?" ³⁵ The 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. ³⁶ And 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸ Then 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. (NRSV)

Luke 1:26-38. ²⁶ Ἐν δὲ τῷ μηνὶ τῷ ἕκτῳ ἀπεστάλη ὁ ἄγγελος Γαβριὴλ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ εἰς πόλιν τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἣ ὄνομα Ναζαρέθ ²⁷ πρὸς παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὄνομα Ἰωσήφ ἐξ οἴκου Δαυὶδ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς παρθένου Μαριάμ. ²⁸ καὶ εἰσελθὼν πρὸς αὐτὴν εἶπεν· χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ. ²⁹ ἡ δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ διεταράχθη καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἶη ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος.

³⁰ καὶ εἶπεν ὁ ἄγγελος αὐτῇ· μὴ φοβοῦ, Μαριάμ, εὕρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. ³¹ καὶ ἰδοὺ συλλήμψῃ ἐν γαστρὶ καὶ τέξῃ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν. ³² οὗτος ἔσται μέγας καὶ υἱὸς ὑψίστου κληθήσεται καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τὸν θρόνον Δαυὶδ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ, ³³ καὶ βασιλεύσει ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον Ἰακώβ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας καὶ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔσται τέλος.

³⁴ εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον· πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο, ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω; ³⁵ καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ ἄγγελος εἶπεν αὐτῇ· πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δύναμις ὑψίστου ἐπισκιάσει σοι· διὸ καὶ τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον κληθήσεται υἱὸς θεοῦ. ³⁶ καὶ ἰδοὺ Ἐλισάβετ ἡ συγγενὴς σου καὶ αὐτὴ συνείληφεν υἱὸν ἐν γήρῃ αὐτῆς καὶ οὗτος μὴν ἕκτος ἐστὶν αὐτῇ τῇ καλουμένῃ στείρα. ³⁷ ὅτι οὐκ ἀδυνατήσῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥῆμα.

³⁸ εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ· ἰδοὺ ἡ δούλη κυρίου· γένοιτό μοι κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου. καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτῆς ὁ ἄγγελος.

1. Jesus

What is said of Jesus in this text?

The Angel describes Jesus in this way:

- a. He will be great (32)
- b. He will be recognized as Son of the Most High (32)
- c. He will be given the throne of David (32)
- d. He will be holy (35)
- e. He will be recognized as the Son of God (35)

These designations for Jesus clearly identify him as the messiah (Heb. *machiach*), which means the “anointed one.” The messiah will be God’s Ruler or Agent through which the kingdom of heaven will become a reality on earth.

“In Jewish thought to be a son of God is never a matter of physical origin.”¹ Rather, the phrase “son of God” primarily referred to the nation of Israel. To call Jesus “the son of God” or “son of the Most High” is to speak of Jesus as the embodiment of Israel itself. He represents Israel. He is faithful Israel and servant of God.

This is messianic language (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 1 Chr. 22:9-10; Psa. 2:7; Psa. 89:26-29); to say Jesus is the Son of the Most High is to say he is the messiah.²

2. Mary

What is said of Mary in this passage?

Mary is mentioned four times in this short paragraph (1:27, 30, 34, 38) and then Mary is mentioned three more times when she visits Elizabeth and when she praises God [the Magnificat] (1:39-56). So it seems to me that next to Jesus, Mary is the focus.

a. Disfavored

We should know that Mary was disadvantaged when compared with other people living in Palestine at that time. To say that she was disadvantaged is to say that she was *disfavored*.

Mary was probably a peasant, one of the most powerless people in her society.³

- She was young in a world that values age—girls were betrothed at age 13 and went to live with the bridegrooms at 14.
- She was a female in a world ruled by men.
- She was poor in a stratified economy.

¹ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35A, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 47.

² John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35A, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 51.

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1991) 39.

- She was without a child or husband to validate her existence in a patriarchal world.

b. Favored

But Mary was said to be favored. In Luke's Gospel, God's activity reverses human expectations. Mary is a case in point.

The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary and addresses her as the "favored one!"

Gabriel also tells her, "The Lord is with you." That phrase is very rare. It is the way the Angel of the Lord called Gideon to lead Israel against the Midianites (Judges 6:12).⁴ In this way, Mary is being addressed the same way as Gideon was; Mary becomes a Gideon like figure through whom Yahweh will rescue the people of God.

How does Mary respond? She is very perplexed (διελογίζετο). She's speechless. What could this greeting mean? We get the impression Mary is stunned and fearful, not only by the appearance of the angel, but also by the way the angel addresses her.

Nevertheless, Gabriel reassures her. He says, "Do not be afraid ... for you have found favor with God." This is the same thing the angel said to Gideon (Judges 6:17). So we can guess that Luke want his readers to see Mary in light of Gideon's call.

c. Conceive in the womb

In verse 31, Gabriel tells Mary: "You will conceive in your womb (συλλήμψῃ ἐν γαστρὶ) and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." There is much debate about verse 31.

The debate concerns whether verse 31 is a fulfillment of prophecy or somehow connects with Isaiah 7:14.

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin [Gk. parthenos] will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (NIV)

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman [Heb. almah] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (NRSV)

Both Luke 1:31 and Isa. 7:14 are very similar. Both mention a conception, a birth, and the naming of the baby. But the matter becomes complicated by the fact that the Greek and Hebrew versions of the Isa. 7:14 do not agree. There are two views.

First, some believe that Isa. 7:14 (8th cent. BCE) was a prediction of the virginal conception of Jesus eight centuries later. The NIV translators agree. So, based on the Greek Septuagint

⁴ It is also used by Boaz to greet the reapers (Ruth 2:4).

version of Isa. 7:14, they translate the English as “virgin” (Gk. *parthenos*). In this way, Isa. 7:14 matches Luke 1:31.

Second, others believe there is no connection between Luke 1:31 and Isa. 7:14. Luke was not alluding to Isaiah’s statement. The NRSV translators agree with this view. So, based on the Hebrew version of Isa. 7:14, they translation the English as “young woman” (Heb. *almah*). In this way, Isa. 7:14 and Luke 1:31 do not match.

John Nolland writes, “On balance it seems most likely that Isa 7:14 is not in view.”⁵

However, the main point of Luke 1:31 is very clear. Mary is given the shocking news that she, a young woman who had never “known” a man, was going to have a baby.⁶

d. Virginal conception

In verse 34, Mary asks how she bear a child when she is a virgin—literally, “since I do not known a man” (ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω).

Why Mary did not suppose that the Angel was referring to having a baby with Joseph is not clear.⁷ Nevertheless, Mary’s question sets up the Angel’s announcement.⁸

The angel announces that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35). Verse 35 is highly metaphorical language.

This language might sound like a euphemism for sexual intercourse. However, the text does not say that. There is not the slightest evidence that the verbs involved here—“will come upon” (1:35; ἐπελεύσεται) or “will overshadow” (1:35; ἐπισκιάσει)—were ever used in relation to sexual activity or in connection with the conception.⁹

Verse 35 simply indicates that a child will be born from God’s creative power, but nothing else.¹⁰ Since Mary is a virgin, we are left with a lot of mystery. What is emphasized is God’s initiative in providing the messianic Son.

e. Messianic inception

The question is: Where does the language about “the Holy Spirit coming upon you” come from?

⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35A, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 51.

⁶ The phrase, “will conceive in the womb” (Heb. *hinnāk hāra*), is a fairly common Hebrew expression and means something like, “You are going to have a baby.”

⁷ See the issues in John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35A, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 53.

⁸ Mary’s question in vs. 34 functions as a literary device to focus the angel’s announcement in vv. 35-37.

⁹ Paraphrasing John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Vol. 35A, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989) 54.

¹⁰ This text offers no hint of biological conception as if God provided 23 chromosomes and Mary the other 23 to make the 46 chromosomes necessary for human life.

It is messianic language. It is used in the context about the messianic age, particularly it is about the “inception of the messianic age,” the eschatological coming of the Spirit.

Isaiah 32:14-18 ¹⁴ For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; ¹⁵ until **a spirit from on high is poured out on us**, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. ¹⁶ Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. ¹⁷ The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. ¹⁸ My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

In the Isaiah passage, verse 14 concludes a section on how bad life had become—the world “gone to hell.” But then, verse 15 says, “until” ... until a spirit from on high is poured out on us. That’s the messianic language of our text about Mary. The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary (Luke 1:35) meaning that the messianic age begins with Mary and her Son. Notice how Isaiah describes that messianic age—justice, righteousness, abundance, peace, quietness, trust and security.

So, when we read that the “Holy Spirit comes upon” Mary, it is not talking about conception, but about messianic inception. This is reinforced by Acts 1:6-8:

Acts 1:6-8. ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will **restore the kingdom to Israel?**” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;** and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The Angel’s announcement about the “Holy Spirit coming upon you” was not so much about *conception* as about *the beginning* of the messianic age; not about *biology*, but *theology*.

3. God

Verse 36 provides a truism about God’s nature and character: “For nothing will be impossible with God” (NRSV).

<u>Luke 1:37</u>
“For nothing will be impossible with God” (NRSV)
ὅτι οὐκ ἀδυνατήσῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥῆμα.
For will not be impossible with God every word (literal) ¹¹

¹¹ Wallace (433) cites this verse as an example of a rare use of *παρὰ*, plus a genitive to express agency. See also LXX Gen. 18:14, Deut. 17:8; Job 10:13; 42:2.

The Greek has the phrase "every word," which is not in the English translations. To put it positively: *Every word of God (just spoken by the angel Gabriel) is possible.*

Luke 18:27: "What is impossible with people is possible with God." (JT)

What the angel said to Mary will happen. The messianic age is possible. You think the messianic age is not possible. Luke says it is. It gives us hope.

From now on hope will look like this. Hope will not come from political parties or candidates. Hope will not come from economic institutions or from military powers.

Rather, hope will come from the Messiah Jesus. Messianic hope will come with justice. Hope will transform the wilderness into a forest. Hope will come with righteousness. And righteousness will create peace, security, and contentment.

C. Mary: The Prototype Believer

In this passage, Mary is presented as the ideal Christian believer.

1. Obedient

Mary is obedient. She is the "graced/favored one" (1:28) and the one who responds to God's call with "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). In a word, Mary displays perfect obedience.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). Mary is the model for all "who hear the word of God and do it."

At the end of the passage, Mary said, "Here am I"—literally, "The Lord's servant" (ἡ δούλη κυρίου). She chose to serve the Lord and obey his word. She didn't run from the task. She didn't hide from God's calling. She took didn't hold back, but took the risk to obey.

2. Courageous

Mary is courageous. She agrees to bear Jesus, even though she is not married. It is clear that Mary became pregnant before marrying Joseph and that Joseph was not the father. This would have been scandalous to the whole village of Nazareth who, we can rest assured, did not buy Mary's story that the Holy Spirit overshadowed her.

Most people don't accept the virginal conception today and most people didn't accept it Jesus' time either. Mary would have been held up for public scorn and insult.

Remember, Mary was about 13 or 14 and she was being called to carry a child without a husband. She knew full well what that meant. It meant shame and pain, ridicule and derision, not just for a few months, but for her entire life.

Mary knew the risk and the responsibility and yet she said, "Here am I Let it be with me according to your word" (γένοιτό μοι κατὰ τὸ ῥήμά σου). That's courage!

Her courage must have like Gideon's. As I mentioned, the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary the same way the angel spoke to Gideon. Gideon faced the overwhelming power of the Midianites, but overcame them with courage and God's help. Mary faced the overwhelming shame that came with having a child that was perceived to be illegitimate, but endured it with courage and God's help.

3. Virgin conception happens within each of us

Mary conceives and bears Christ within. With Mary as our prototype, we can also say that the virgin conception happens within each of us. According to Luke, the messianic age begins in Mary's womb. She carried the embryonic messiah and beginnings of the messianic age. She nurtured and protected the hope of humanity and the life of God within her. She bore Christ within.

Giving birth to Christ is also a model for us. Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic and Dominican theologian of the thirteenth century (1260- 1327), spoke of the virgin birth as something that happens *within us*. Like Mary, we must give birth to Christ/God within us. For Eckhart, the story of Jesus' birth is not just about the past, but about the present life of Christ/God within us.

How is Christ/God born within us? According to Eckhart, God is born in us through progressive "stripping" of the self/ego—the purifying one's thoughts, emotions, desires, and imagination. When we detach from whatever is not God, even our "ideas about God," we discover the presence of God within us.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have tried to show that the passage usually thought to be about the virgin conception is really about the messianic inception through Mary's willingness to receive and obey God's calling. She carries the messianic hope within her, namely, Jesus the Messiah. In the way, Mary is our exemplar, the ideal believer to imitate. Like Mary, we are also called to conceive and give birth to Christ/God within us.

Conclude by having the congregation read this blessing in English and Hebrew.¹²

SALVATION BLESSING

Recite this at any time:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ הוֹיָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָנוּ אֶת דְּרֶךְ הַיְשׁוּעָה
בְּמַשִּׁיחַ יֵשׁוּעַ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. אָמֵן.

ba·rukḥ at·tah Adonai, E·lo·he·nu me·lekh ha·o·lam,
a·sher na·tan la·nu et de·rekh ha·ye·shu·ah
b'ma·shi·ach Ye·shu·a ba·rukḥ hu. A·men

Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe,
Who gave to us the way of salvation
through the Messiah Yeshua, blessed be He. Amen.

¹² Other Hebrew prayer blessings are available at www.hebrew4christians.com.