

Many times when angels appear in the Bible they announce the birth of a child – often a miraculous birth to a couple who were too old; or to a couple who had been unsuccessful in conceiving a child.

Just before our Gospel text, an angel has appeared to Zechariah to announce that his wife, who had never had children and was now too old to bear children, would give birth to a son. This is similar to what happened to Abraham and Sarah, who gave birth to Isaac in their old age.

In all of these cases, the parents had been praying for a child and God answered their prayers, even though the parents might have preferred the answer when they were a little bit younger.

The situation is different in our text. Mary has not been praying for a child. She's not even married yet. She is engaged to Joseph. According to ancient customs the marriage would have been arranged by her father when the girl was 12 or 13 years old. At that time the bride becomes engaged or betrothed to the groom; but she continues to live at home for a year. This engagement was a binding contract. The couple will be referred to as husband and wife. If the husband dies, the wife is considered a widow; but it is after the yearlong engagement that the husband comes to take his wife to his home with a big party. We read about a wedding celebration in Cana. After they ran out of wine, Jesus changed 120-180 gallons of water into wine. There was a lot of drinking at wedding parties. They could last a week.

Mary is engaged, but she is not living with her husband when the angel Gabriel breaks into her life.

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus," is the angel's message to Mary.

On one hand it is a natural message. It is to be expected that a young bride who is going to be married soon will conceive soon after the marriage and bear a child.

On the other hand, as the conversation develops, this birth will be something entirely new. Mary asks, "*How* can this be, since I am a virgin?" On one hand, Mary should have known *how* conceptions happen – especially as she is about to be married. It's likely that all of the other miraculous conceptions in the Bible occurred the natural way.

On the other hand, Luke really isn't writing a history, but a theological truth about Jesus. By having Mary ask, "How?" the angel can explain the unique character of this conception, which we, the readers, hear. There's been nothing like it before or since.

While there are many ancient stories about great men being born without human fathers, that is, with a god as the father, none of those stories are quite like the birth of Jesus. While there are numerous stories of miraculous births in the Bible, none of them are quite like the birth of Jesus. Nowhere in biblical history does God break into our world in quite the same way as he does with the angel's announcement to Mary. Nowhere in ancient history does God break into our world in quite the same way as he does with the conception of this child who will be called Jesus, the Son of the Most High, the holy one, the Son of God.

On one hand, our text is about the unique character of this birth. That happened once in the history of humankind. It is a statement about an historical event.

On the other hand, as important as this unique birth is, I agree with Martin Luther who

said that the true miracle of the Christmas story is not that God became human – that should be easy for the one powerful enough to create the universe – but that Mary believed the angel. I think that a more applicable theme from our text is Mary’s response to this unexpected encounter with God in her life. She puts herself at God’s disposal, saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

In contrast to Mary, when an angel appeared and gave his message to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, we are told that because he did not believe the words of the angel, he would be unable to speak until everything had occurred just as the angel said. The angel’s word was going to happen whether he believed it or not.

There is a sense that the entire gospel of Luke is concerned about how people respond to the word of God. The verse translated in our text: “Nothing is impossible for God,” literally states, “No *word* will be impossible with God.” What God says will happen, will happen. Even though Zechariah didn’t believe the word from the angel, his wife was going to give birth to a son. God had said it, it was going to happen.

A group of women go to Jesus’ tomb and find it empty. After two men in shining white clothing remind them what Jesus had said about the resurrection, then it says: “They remembered his *words*.”¹

Immediately, they go to the disciples and tell them what they have seen and heard. Then Luke tells us, “But these *words* seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”² Even though they didn’t believe the women’s words about the resurrection. Jesus had said it would happen ... and it happen.

In contrast to Zechariah and the apostles who don’t believe God’s word, we have Mary as an example of faithfulness. She believes the angel’s word from God. She puts herself under the power of the word. Rather than silence, she will sing the Magnificat.

Later in this gospel, Jesus is told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” Jesus’ response can be translated, “My mother and brothers are those who listen to God’s *word* and do it.”³

This exchange comes only five verses after Jesus has explained the parable of the sower. He says that the seed in the good soil “are the ones who, when they hear the *word*, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with endurance.”⁴

Mary, at the beginning of this gospel, is presented as a model of faithfulness. She hears the word of God. She commits herself to it with a good and upright heart. She waits for God’s Word to bear fruit in her – and it will.

A commentator wrote about Mary: “In Mary, humanity is represented as the recipient of this life and love from God. With her quiet awaiting of God’s act she is the figure of Advent, the opposite of the nervous activity of modern society.”⁵

The message of this text and of Christmas in general is that God is breaking into our world and into our lives. We, then, have to ponder how we will respond to this God who has come to us. Will we believe his word and promises? Will we consider ourselves the Lord’s servants? Will

¹ Luke 24:8

² Luke 24:11

³ Luke 8:20-21

⁴ Luke 8:15

⁵ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, p. 31

we put our lives at God's disposal? Will we let God use us as God used Mary?

Although none of us are the "mother of God" as Mary was, all of us have Christ within us. Although none of us will bring Jesus Christ into the world in the same way that Mary did, all of us bring Jesus Christ into the world around us. Because Christ is in us, Christ goes where we go.

Few of us will encounter an angel as Mary did. It is unlikely that any of us will conceive and give birth to a child as Mary did. However, all of us can hear the word of God as Mary did. All of us can commit ourselves to God's Word with a good and upright heart so that we will bear good fruit as Mary did. All of us can put ourselves – our entire lives – at God's disposal, as Mary did. Mary, besides being the mother of God, is an example of faithfulness for all of us. How different would the world be today if everyone who celebrated the birth of Christ, would respond to God's claim on their lives as Mary did? "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."