

**“Pregnant with Possibilities”**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Luke 1:26--38 (NRSV)**

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged (*betrothed*) to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."  
<sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.  
<sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>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.

**Sermon:**

This morning we've heard from Luke's Gospel the beautiful story of the enunciation to Mary of Jesus' conception by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel, in Jewish lore, was one of God's four heavenly lieutenants along with Michael, Uriel, and Raphael. Gabriel seems to be more of the liaison between God and earth than the other prominent heavenly beings.

These passages from Luke's Gospel along with those from the Gospel of Matthew are the only two recognized sources of our Christian traditions concerning the birth of Jesus. Traditionally, these stories from Matthew and Luke get mushed together into the scripts of Christmas pageants. However, any serious bible study must reject this squashing together and let each gospel account stand on its own with all the authors' inconsistencies and contradictions. To this, I remind us that as much as Matthew and Luke may have used Mark's Gospel as the framework for their gospels, Mark has no birth narrative. Paul, our first NT writer, makes no mention of Jesus' birth and views Jesus somewhat as the gospel writer of John, as a preexistent divine being.

All that stuff aside, I am sure Luke's story tapped into many of your Christmas memories. Memories of the hopefulness and promises of Christmas pageants that you may have played in, your kids played in, or Christmas services and family times across the years. And, therein lies the truest power of the story.

During the Christmas season, there is an annual resurgence of pro and con articles on the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. The History Channel, A & E, and the National Geographic Channel present various Christmas programs wherein biblical scholars of whatever ilk critique the Christmas story often explaining that these passages are not so much about the facts of Jesus birth but beautiful, poetic myths about hope and God's presence in the world. However, in all fairness in religious studies, myth has a more powerful connotation in that from the dawn of human thinking myth has been the way in which the human mind and spirit perceives the workings of the universe beyond our normal abilities to comprehend or express. In other words, I may not have the facts, but let me tell you a true story.

It is recognized that we humans can only know things that exist in this universe. To talk about anything lying outside this universe is pure conjecture and limited to our saying that things outside this universe are somehow like things in this universe, but not really. So, I would totally discount the idea that biblical stories are just stories designed to capture the imaginations of children and the simple-minded to foster hope and moral correctness. I think they are the vehicles for conveying truth from beyond this world.

Another error associated with the reading of our scriptures today is that in our western linear and sequential thinking processes, we read this story about the birth of Jesus by starting at the beginning of the story reading to its end, and therein obtain its meaning. This is not how the ancient reader and listener would have understood this story. In the ancient world, babies and children were viewed as miniature people endowed at conception with their entire life scripts and character. In the minds of the ancients, children didn't progress through various psycho-social or psycho-sexual stages of development per se. People were infants, children, adults, and old people with enduring character and consciousness from the day of conception. Therefore, to this point, we must hear this birth story of Jesus reflecting his nature as an apocalyptic preacher and worker of wonders, who taught the proper understandings of Torah, and was crucified and affirmed as the Messiah in his resurrection as a divinely, destined person-baby.

I would also caution those people who see Luke's story of the annunciation as a quaint tale for children or some regressive religious, foundational myth to be very careful lest they undermine the power of every verse in the bible for their lives as well as sabotage their own spiritual potential in everyday reality. Thus, those who want to discount the facticity of Luke's story go ahead, but in the process be very, very careful not to discount its seriousness and truthfulness.

As you know, I tend to take the path in biblical interpretation and scholarship that affirms truths within scripture as opposed to taking either a literal, figurative, or even a metaphorical position. I do so because I want to be all I can be morally, ethically, and spiritually, and as most of us know, spirituality has far more to do with truth than facts. Moreover, spirituality is not so much about religious orthodoxy, scientific proofs, or critical literary, historical, or source analysis; but rather, it is living in the awareness of God's presence in the world.

I've been told that this is a cop-out position. One must take a stand on one side or the other, none of this fence straddling stuff. To those who would try to force me and others into such false dilemmas, I want to tell you a story from John Thomas Randolph's book, The Best Gift, CSS, 1983, pp. 24-25.

Randolph tells the story of a seventh-grade girl named Kristin. Kristin was a very bright and sensitive girl, but she didn't understand everything she heard at church. (I am sure many of us can identify with that.)

One day when Kristin was in the cafeteria at school, one of her curious, coming-of-age girlfriends, who was curious as only a seventh-grader can be, asked Kristin if she was a virgin. Well, Kristin was on the spot because she didn't really know what a virgin was. But, being a bright kid, she did some quick thinking that went something like this: the only virgin she had heard of was Mary and everyone knew that Mary had a baby - baby Jesus. Therefore, a virgin must be a woman who has had a baby.

Thus, armed with this conclusion, Kristin announced loudly to her friend in the cafeteria, "No! I am not a virgin!" As several kids nearby registered their shock, one little boy - and boys always seem to know this stuff - whispered to Kristin, "Kristin, I don't think you know what you are talking about!"

To those with their hyper-critical appraisals of Luke's story of the annunciation of Jesus' conception and birth - and I won't whisper, but rather shout - I don't think you know what you are talking about!

Luke's story of the annunciation of Jesus' conception has very little to do with Mary physically or the angel as a supernatural being. If we think it does, then we miss the point. I think people miss the point, as I said earlier because of our traditional way of reading the gospels as a simple beginning-to-end narrative. The crux of the story is God's divine, eternal presence, wisdom, and love manifested in Jesus of Nazareth - one, who is divinely authoritative for all human existence. Said another way, the heart of these scriptures is about God caring enough to send the very best. In the way of the Christ, humankind is brought fully on-line with the highest and best relationship possible to God, to nature, and to others so that we might experience the abundance of joy in this life and the next. The way of Christ being, love to the point of self-sacrifice.

The story of the annunciation of Jesus' impending birth to a young, peasant girl, who is betrothed or under a marriage contract, not romantically engaged to a man named Joseph, is not a story about a gynecological miracle. Mary's virginity is not an historical fact that we can prove as we prove other things; but, I tell you this, the story is without a doubt true. It is a powerful, life-changing story about God's caring and concern for all of humanity made manifest in the historical conception, birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who is believed by many of us Christians to have been inspired by God from the moment of his conception.

Regardless of whether one believes this story we've heard today literally, metaphorically, or mythologically, we cannot deny that these scriptures and their images possess the power to tease out an awareness of God's eternal presence and caring for humankind that I eluded to earlier along with the insight that "nothing is impossible with God." People, all we have to do is look at the universe and all its wonders and inconsistencies and then ask ourselves all the silly questions we want to about Jesus' conception, birth, his life ministry, and his resurrection.

This story of the wondrous annunciation is one more example of a theme throughout scripture; which is, God does not always conform to our human expectations, so let us be very careful in what we minimize and dismiss as a quaint, entertaining myth for children and the simple minded at our own peril. The story tells us that God can work real and decisive wonders in the lives of those who live by faith.

There is another constant biblical motif in our scriptures today; that being, God works in the ordinary, the common place, God's mighty works, and wonders to behold. Therefore, the living and ongoing impact of Luke's story of the annunciation of Jesus' conception to a young, peasant girl is a truth for the ages that tells us that out of the obscurity, commonness, and the weakness of humanity, God can and does bring about incredible things. Luke's story gives vision and voice to something from beyond this universe that I think humankind has always intuitively known but lacked the language or terms to express fully until the birth of Jesus. That knowledge is Our Creator-Sustainer cares and in Jesus the Christ cared enough to send the very best.

In closing, let's look briefly at Mary's response to Gabriel as the author of Luke looked out into the future of his world in and through her answer. Mary, more than just a young woman acquiescing to a powerful male presence, submits to God's will, "Behold, I am the handmaid [female servant] of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. "

My dear friends, the Holy Spirit has come upon each one of us and has conceived in us as the Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians a new being. Problem is that for many people their pregnancy seems to be a perpetual and terminal condition. Many are pregnant with Jesus possibilities, but refuse to give birth to Jesus realities. In the Spirit of the Christ, we are new creatures with phenomenal possibilities for ourselves, our families, our church, our communities, our nation, and for the world, but to make real these possibilities we must echo and live out Mary's statement, "let it be to me according to your word." Remember, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Please note that the author of Luke does not say "nothing is impossible for God," but "nothing is impossible with God." To this point, I would add that nothing is impossible if God's

people will work "with" God in God's divine purposes. I believe those divine purposes are to seek the abundance of joy in life for all creature and creation - joy being the exaltation of body, mind, and spirit in the awareness that we are at one with God, Creation, and Creature as God takes joy in us now and forevermore.

#### Bibliography

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