

How Can You Believe This?

(Luke 1:26-38)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is the last week in Advent and we are looking at this section from the Gospel according to Luke. The section about the conception of Jesus. This sermon is entitled 'How can you believe this?'

The angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth to tell the virgin Mary that she will conceive from the Holy Spirit and bear a son, the Son of the Most High.

So what do **you** think about it? What kind of story **is** this? Remember that we say it in our Creeds every Sunday: "I believe that He ...was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human..." You just said it!

Today we will try to answer three questions. First, how could Luke **know** all of this? Second, how could this possibly happen? Third, what does it mean for us or what does it teach us?

Do you know who Luke was? Yes, he was the author of both the gospel according to Luke and also the book of Acts. From his pen we know about both the life of Jesus and also a history of the early church. But who **was** this Luke? As much as we know from the Bible itself, and also from the Church tradition, Luke was a physician, educated man and we can say a scientifically minded man.

The apostle Paul says in his letter to Colossians "**beloved physician Luke**". Luke probably travelled with Paul on his second missionary journey as we can read it in Acts. He was also with Paul when Paul was imprisoned. Luke's care for Paul may have extended Paul's life and given us a few more of his letters.

So, how did Luke know about the conception of Jesus? He explains it in the beginning of his gospel account. That is, he closely examined testimonies of eyewitnesses and testimonies of those to whom the Gospel was entrusted.

What did it mean for him to explore the testimonies of the eyewitnesses? We know for sure that Luke was with the apostle Paul at least from year 49AD. He might have become a Christian already 10 to 15 years after Jesus resurrection, if not earlier.

So when he refers to eyewitnesses they could be the apostles, or Jesus brothers and even Mary herself. When we see how close these events were in time, – (Jesus resurrection and ministry of Luke were separated may be only by a decade) –, it helps us to appreciate the message of his gospel as an historical record.

As Luke himself put it, he did all of this so “***That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.***” (Luke 1:4) That you may have certainty. This includes you, who receive Luke’s message today.

This is how Luke knew it. This was the whole purpose for Luke writing his gospel account, to check the facts from eyewitnesses. He was a doctor, a scientifically minded man, and he wanted to check everything carefully so that we can be certain about how everything happened.

Let’s get to our second question. How could this possibly happen? You know: the angel Gabriel; virgin Mary; conceived by the Holy Spirit. All the things we say in our Creeds. Let’s look at how Luke describes it.

We don’t know what the angel looked like. He just showed up and said: “***Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!***” But we know how Mary reacted to this greeting. She was greatly troubled ...

So the angel proceeds to calm her down. “***Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.***” Stop being afraid, this is good news.

Girls used to marry early those days. We can imagine this teenage girl being approached by the angel and what follows is not quite usual, actually quite ... scary.

“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

She was just a girl. What do we hear when we read these words? His name will be Jesus. In Hebrew it was Jeshua, which means God Yahweh saves or God Yahweh is salvation. Impressive name.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. In other words, He will be called the Son of God. The Son of God! And the Lord will give Him the throne of David.

We heard in our reading from Samuel this morning that the Lord promised that He will establish for king David's son the throne of his kingdom forever. Now this promise was about to be fulfilled through Mary.

And His kingdom will have no end... What incredible promises, how great the words, – “the Son of God”, “the eternal kingdom”. Mind blowing. **We** may wonder about many things in relation to these mighty promises, when we read these words by Luke. But **Mary** was simply a young lady. She didn't worry about these **great** things. She was worried about something else. ***‘How could this be, since I am a virgin?’ How could I conceive a son, if I do not have a husband yet?***

You see, Mary was not worried about the great things that the angel told, and were hard to understand, **she** was worried about what she understood **well**. How could this be? It is impossible!

She was betrothed to Joseph and knew how children are conceived. That's why she was so confused. Let's leave aside these big words, and future promises, I don't understand ... I can't be pregnant.

And the angel answered 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 called holy – the Son of God.”***

And here is the sign for you, so that you can believe. ***“Behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”***

The angel told **her** exactly as much as **we** can understand. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you. That is, the same Spirit, who was hovering upon the waters before the Creator ordered His creation, the same Spirit will come upon you.

So? How sufficient was the angels explanation? In a sense he told what was going to happen and how Mary will conceive. But, on the other hand, what the angel said was, and remained as, mysterious as what he said before.

What does it mean, ***“the Holy Spirit will come upon you”***. Can we understand it? No. We can't. Could Mary understand it? Probably not much more than us. The Holy Spirit, God Himself will intervene into His creation and will create something new.

How can you explain the work of the Holy Spirit? He is the Creator, we are creatures, His creature. Beloved, very dear, but creatures. Limited in our ability to comprehend what God does and how. Then Mary said, ***“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”*** And the angel departed from her.

We can't explain more than the angel revealed, only what Mary herself later shared with others. This is as much as is given to us. But what is given is very simple and clear. Jesus Christ was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

It's clear, not because we can understand or explain it, and Luke as a doctor knew it very well, it's clear for we know who was at work at Jesus conception. If we believe that God created this Universe, that He is coming to restore the entire creation back to its goodness, then the conception of Jesus is a small thing for Him.

Now our last question. What does this mean for us, or what can we learn from this event? Trust God's word. Trust what God promises. Trust God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Trust that He is fully capable of doing what He has promised to you. To **you**. And in a sense, this is the hardest part. And this is what we can learn from Mary.

It is not **easy** to believe that there was the angel. But, let it be. It is not **easy** to believe what this angel said will happen to Mary, but let it be. If she herself testified about this, and if Jesus proved that He is exactly what the angel said, let it be, we'll take it.

We can measure evidence and go where highest probability leads us, to take this to be a true account of what happened. But so far it has nothing to do personally with you, right? But think what it meant for Mary personally to say these words:

"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." It meant that something would happen that would change her life forever. There would be no way back. And still she said almost as Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane – ***"let your will happen"***. ***"Let it be to me according to your word"***.

What do we say to the Lord, when He speaks to us? When He tells us what is going to happen? Of course, our situation is different. To Mary God promised the Son. We, on the other hand, are made children of God **through** Mary's son.

When she said 'yes' the Saviour of the human race was conceived. When we, or our parents said 'yes' in our baptism, we were adopted into God's family. If you are baptised, this is who you are now, a child of God.

And we can say as Mary said: ***"I don't understand, how could this be?"*** That's true. I don't understand how could this be that through water and word in holy baptism I can become a child of God.

But I know that the same Spirit who formed and ordered this world is at work. The same Spirit who came upon Mary. The same Spirit whom Jesus promised to give His church. To give abundantly.

God speaks to you through His messengers as He did to Mary. What God says, we can't always understand. But we **know** that we can trust that whatever He promises He will fulfil. He is the Creator. He is not bound by anything, but His promises.

As it is written: "**God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?**" (Num. 23:19).

He has said to you: "**I take you to be my child. I forgive you all your sins. I come to you to bless you. Here I am, take and eat, this is my body, and this is my blood, which is shed for you.**"

I am with you till the end of this age. I will never leave you and will never forsake you. Now I go to prepare the place for you in my Father's house so that where I am you can also be."

I can't understand all of this. I guess **you** can't either. But we can be as certain, as certain we could possibly be about anything, – He is coming back to restore His creation, and you'll be with him in His Kingdom.

We know this for Jesus promised it and He Himself confirmed it saying: "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**" (Mat 24:35)

May all these promises give you light and joy in this Christmas time.

Amen.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Guntars Baikovs, Grace Tununda and read by Phillip Edwards, 20 December 2020