

## **LUKE 1.26-38: GOD SURPRISES**

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God is a God of surprises! He is the God of the unexpected!

He always defies expectation.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the ‘annunciation’, the occasion when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with a message from God.

This morning it is my intention to take a look at this surprising story

### **1. GOD SURPRISED MARY**

Mary at the time was “**promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David**” (1.27).

Now in Jewish society of that day ‘engagement’ or ‘betrothal’ was a much more serious affair than in our society.

- In first-century Palestine betrothal was quite as binding as marriage itself, and could only be dissolved by divorce.
- Should the man to whom the girl was betrothed die, then in the eyes of the law she became a widow.

It was no exaggeration to say that nothing but death could normally break a betrothal. And if you were to become pregnant with somebody else’s child during this period of betrothal, it was as if you had committed adultery – and death by stoning was your punishment.

Mary had probably not even reached her teens - for betrothal normally took place in a girl’s thirteenth year.

As a 12 year-old she would have been still living at home in Nazareth with her parents – it was only at the end of the customary year-long betrothal that girls were then taken into the home of their husbands; it was only then too that sexual relationships began. So like any other girl at her stage, Mary was a “**virgin**”, a fact which is high-lighted by Luke in his account: twice in v27 he mentions that Mary was a virgin (although strangely this is not brought out in the GNB); and this is repeated yet again in v34.

Luke tells us that it was in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy that “**God sent the angel Gabriel**” (v26) to Mary.

Gabriel is only one of two angels named in the Bible (the other is Michael).

In Jewish angelology he was deemed to be one of the archangels who stand before God’s throne (see 1.19).

The implication is therefore that Gabriel came to Mary with a direct message from God. Precisely how he came, and in what form he came, we don’t know.

Did Gabriel appear to Mary in the form of a vision? We don’t know.

Gabriel prefaced his message by stressing the privilege that is about to be bestowed on Mary. “**Peace be with you... the Lord...has greatly blessed you**” (1.28 GNB) – literally: “**Greetings, favoured one!**” (1.28 NRSV).

Mary, says the angel, you are in receipt of God’s favour, blessing, – and the clear implication is that this favour or blessing is undeserved.

It is all of grace (the Greek word ‘favoured’, *kecharitomene*, has at its root the Greek word for ‘grace’, ‘*charis*’).

Unfortunately the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible understood Mary as deserving God's favour: "*Hail Mary, full of grace*", which led Roman Catholics to believe that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus because of the special grace which was hers. So Pope Pius IX declared: "*This solemn and unparalleled salutation, heard at no other time, shows the Mother of God as the seat of all divine graces, and as adorned with all the gifts of the Spirit*".

From this misinterpretation of the text arose the belief in Mary's immaculate conception: viz. it was Mary's unique experience of grace, which preserved her from original sin and from sinning during her life.

Furthermore, Roman Catholics came to believe that as a result of her fullness of grace Mary is able to dispense grace to others.

But the underlying Greek doesn't admit of such interpretation. Mary was just an ordinary village girl, whom God in his grace had chosen.

To be fair, it has not simply been Roman Catholics who have sought to find a reason for God's choice of Mary.

- Some have suggested she was particularly devout
- Some that she was particularly warm-hearted and loving
- Others that she exhibited a wisdom beyond her years
- Peterson in his paraphrase *The Message* suggests she had a special kind of beauty: "You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out"

But the fact is that there is no real reason why God should have chosen her.

In no way did she deserve to be the mother of God. It was all of grace.

And what is true of Mary is true of us all, God's grace is always unmerited.

Interestingly, the only other place in the New Testament where the same word 'favoured' appears is in Eph 1.6: there it is used of all Christians who have experienced the forgiving grace which God "**gave us in his dear Son**".

God's actions are always all of grace.

Luke tells us that Mary was "**deeply troubled by the angel's message**" (1.29). That was an understatement. She must have been "thoroughly shaken" (*The Message*).

For as Gabriel went on, she discovered that the particular favour or blessing which she was to experience was that she was to conceive and to give birth to a son, whom she would name 'Jesus' (The Lord saves!):

**"Don't be afraid Mary; God has been gracious to you [The Message: 'God has a surprise for you!']. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end"** (1.30-32).

What an amazing message! Every woman believes her first-born to be special – and no doubt David & Jesse are special. But Mary's child is in another league.

He is to be the long-awaited Messiah, who will come & free God's oppressed people.

And whereas in popular thought it was envisaged that the Messiah's reign would only be temporary and would come to an end when the Kingdom of God was ushered in,

here the rule of Jesus is associated with the rule of God himself: "**his kingdom will have no end**".

Perhaps not surprisingly, Mary's first thought, however, was not about the identity of her son, but rather about the fact that she is to give birth to a son: "**I am a virgin. How then can this be?**" (1.34).

For Mary the thought of having a child during her year of betrothal was unthinkable.

And so it is. For what is clearly implied here is Virgin Birth – or rather a Virgin Conception, and virgin conceptions simply do not happen in the real world.

Mary knew that, so too Luke and his readers.

Scepticism about the virgin birth is no modern phenomenon. True, the ancient world knew nothing of X & Y chromosomes, but they did know that babies are the result of men and women coming together in sexual intercourse.

Gabriel didn't attempt to rationalize the process of Virgin Birth.

Instead he assigned all responsibility to God: "**The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you**" (1.35).

Unlike Greek legends, which depicted the gods ravishing attractive young females, there is nothing sexual about God's creative activity here.

Just as the Spirit was active in the creation of the world (Gen 1.2), so here he is active in a new creation.

The fact that the child to be born will be called the '**Son of God**' has nothing to do with physical origin: indeed, in Jewish thought the notion of divine sonship is generally focused on adoption or election to a special relationship with God (see, for instance, the key text of 2 Sam 7.14 which underlies this passage).

Gabriel then went on to give an instance of the creative power of God: he pointed to the unusual fact of Elizabeth's pregnancy – she was both old and infertile, and yet she was already six-months pregnant. This in itself is a sign of God's ability to surprise.

**"For there is nothing God cannot do"** (1.37 GNB) **"for nothing will be impossible with God"** (NRSV).

Almost certainly Luke intended his readers to see a reference back to the story of Sarah and her sceptical reaction on being promised a son in her old age.

On hearing that she was going to have a son, Sarah laughed – she was too old – in the words of Genesis **"she had stopped having monthly periods"** years ago: but the Lord rebuked her and declared **'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'** (Gen 18.11,14).

True, Sarah and Mary were in very different positions – Sarah was too old, whereas Mary was in effect too young.

Yet God did the seemingly impossible in both their lives.

But unlike Sarah, Mary didn't laugh. She quietly accepted God's will for her life: **"I am the Lord's servant may it happen to me as you have said"** (1.38).

In one sense she recognized that she had no option: for as **"the Lord's servant"** (literally, his 'slave': *doulos*) his wish was her command.

And yet Mary was no puppet on a string. She could have rejected God's calling on her life. Instead, she said her 'Yes' to God's initiative of grace: **"May it happen to me as you have said"**. Whereupon the angel Gabriel departs, his mission accomplished.

## 2. GOD STILL SURPRISES

There, then, is the story. What has it to say to us?

As I read this story the theme which emerges most clearly for me is this: God has an extraordinary ability to surprise us. “**There is nothing that God cannot do**” (1.37).

These words sum up the birth stories of both John the Baptist and of Jesus.

- Zechariah and Elizabeth were well past the time of having children – so much so that when Gabriel foretold the birth of John, Zechariah refused to believe. Yet amazingly she did conceive – she did give birth to a child in her old age.
- Even more extraordinary was the birth of Jesus – Mary was a virgin – virgin births, or rather virgin conceptions, do not happen. Yet amazingly, Mary gave birth to a child, virgin though she was.

How are we to account for such a birth?

- From time to time parallels are drawn with parthenogenesis (‘virgin birth’) which is present in about one in a thousand species. Bees, frogs and worms are known to reproduce in this way. It means that eggs begin to divide and develop of their own accord, without fertilisation, and eventually produce a new individual. Parthenogenesis, however, is unknown in humans.
- Furthermore, if Jesus had been conceived by parthenogenesis, then he would have had to be a girl, because women can only pass on X chromosomes. In normal reproductive intercourse girls are conceived when the male sperm adds a second X to the ovum’s X chromosome; boys are conceived when the sperm adds a Y chromosome.
- Sam (R.J.) Berry, emeritus professor of genetics at University College, London, has speculated that in the absence of a sperm to import a Y chromosome, Mary could have been male, but suffered a genetic mutation that had the effect of preventing target cells in her body from ‘recognising’ the male sex hormone testosterone; Mary would have been chromosomally XY but would appear as a normal female. Although, as a result of androgen insensitivity, she would normally then be sterile and lack a uterus, Berry points out that the differentiation of the sex organs can be variable, and it is possible a person of this constitution could develop an ovum and a uterus. If this happened, and if the ovum developed partheno-genetically, and if a back-mutation to testosterone sensitivity took place, we would then have the situation of an apparently normal woman giving birth without intercourse to a son!

But such rationalising is not helpful. For what Luke as indeed Matthew describe is an event totally out of the ordinary – totally beyond the normal course of nature.

The virgin conception was and is unique. The only parallels which we may draw are either the creation itself, or God’s re-creation evidenced in resurrection.

Indeed, once we believe in the God of creation and resurrection, difficulties in believing in the virgin birth disappear.

True, such an argument could be seen to encourage general credulity. However, once all other options have been examined and no adequate basis found for abandoning the essential tradition of a virginal conception, then faith in the living God must step in.

In this respect I have found helpful some words of John Taylor, a former Bishop of St Albans: *“I find it easier to accept that when God chose to reveal himself in a human life, he did it as a one-off exercise rather than go through what the bureaucrats call ‘the usual channels’. A Saviour of the world, without a touch of the miraculous at the beginning, the middle and the end of his life, I would find totally perplexing”!*

**“There is nothing too hard for God”**, declared the angel.

Centuries before Jeremiah had come to a similar conclusion: **“Sovereign Lord, you made the earth and the sky by your great power and might; nothing is too difficult for you”** (Jer 32.16)..

Nothing is impossible for God.

In the words of the Apostle Paul: God **“by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than all we can ask for, or even think of”** (Eph 3.20).

Think of what God might do – whether it be in your life, or in the life of the world – then double, it, treble it even – and even then you would still not have reached God’s maximum.

The word ‘impossible’ does not feature in God’s vocabulary.

Ambrose, the 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop of Milan, once asked the question: “What is impossible to God?” His answer: “Not that which is difficult to his power, but that which is contrary to his nature”. I.e. where the purpose is good or right, then nothing is too difficult for God.

But time and again God needs faith to be the catalyst before he takes action.

Mary, for instance, in accepting God’s call on her life, had a very real part to play in the coming of Jesus to our world. It took faith to respond and say: **“I am the Lord’s servant, may it happen to me as you have said”**. As one writer put it: “It was in the space created by Mary’s faith – and not simply in her womb – that the Word became flesh” (Robert Ellsberg). Or as another writer put it, in accepting God’s will for her life, Mary became “the Mother of Believers”.

If God is to work in our lives, and indeed, in the life of the church, we too must believe that **“there is nothing that God cannot do”**.

The fact is that God “by means of his power working in us” CAN DO “so much more than all we can ask for or even think of” – but for him to work, we need to believe.

Here is a challenge to our faith. Do we really believe that with God nothing is impossible?

- When we pray for our loved ones, do we pray in hope with fingers crossed, or do we pray in faith, believing that God’s power is limitless?
- When we come to invite friends & neighbours to our Christmas services, will we invite them hoping that on the off-chance they might have nothing else better to do, or will we invite them believing that God is able to overcome the prevailing mood of cynicism & apathy?
- When we are faced with what appear to be impossible situations, whether at home or at work, do we believe that **“there is nothing that God cannot do”**?

It is amazing what God can do when by faith we give room to him to work in our lives and in the lives of others.

God is the God of surprises – my prayer is that in our life together as a church we shall discover that to be increasingly true.