



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Can We Go Over That Part Again?

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 1:26-39

December 4, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The Christmas story gets started with an angel. A messenger who brings a word from beyond us, a word from the heart of God. Because it is a word from God and not our own word, it can be unsettling, it can be joyous, it can be confusing, or all of these. The messenger tells Mary that she is favored, graced, chosen. God is with you. Knowing that God has chosen to be with you can be unsettling, joyous, and confusing. Why would God choose to be with us?

The messenger says, “Mary, you will have a son. I know your families have arranged for you to marry Joseph and I know that hasn’t happened yet. And I know children come after one has been married, but the love of God will be born in you. And apparently God can’t wait any longer.”

It’s a risky word. There would be absolutely zero social acceptance for a child born before marriage in those days. The social consequences of this heavenly news would have been enough to scare Mary to death. Because angels always bring such surprising words, they have to continually remind us, “Don’t be afraid.” But Mary’s response is less fear and more confused. She says, “Can you go over that first part again—the part about me having a baby? You know I’m a virgin, right? So can you just run through how this is going to happen?” Sometimes it’s important to understand how something works.

In our house, it’s not uncommon for Carol to bring food to the table and I take a bite and it is delicious. So I ask, “How did you prepare this?” “Oh, I don’t really remember.” “Well, how did you season this?” “There’s some garlic and that chili lime seasoning from Trader Joe’s, and some other things.” “Can you make this again? Just like this?” “Oh, I doubt it. I didn’t write anything down. I just tossed in what seemed good. Enjoy it while it lasts,” she says.

I do. And I’m grateful. But sometimes it would be nice to know how it came together. To have a recipe. Mary begins by asking for the recipe. How is this going to work?

Mary is not the only person to ask that question. More than a few through the years have had a question or two about how this virgin-birth stuff works. If you think I’m going to explain it to you, well, you are going to be very disappointed.

This may be where Mary begins, but very quickly she finds herself in a different place regarding this word from God. Did you notice? She begins: “How is this going to work?” But she doesn’t stay there long.

She asks Gabriel, “Can you go over that first part again?” To understand Gabriel’s answer, it’s helpful to remember the creation story—the first verses of the Bible—where it says there was chaos and life was not possible. But the spirit of God hovered over the waters, came over the chaos and life emerged. Creation. Gabriel’s response echoes the creation story. Gabriel, almost jumping up and down with excitement, says, “The spirit of God will come over you and work a new creation in you.” And as if the angel could see Mary’s raised eyebrows saying, “What?” Gabriel says, “Look, I don’t really know, but I know with God all things are possible. And Mary, you are chosen; you are graced.”

And that seems to be enough for Mary because she stops asking questions about logistics and says, “I’m in. I’m all in. I want to be who God wants me to be.”

Mary begins by asking questions so that someday she could explain Christmas. But Christmas doesn’t work that way. The truth of this birth is not something we explain. It is something that claims us.

Author and theologian, David Ford has said these words don’t convince us; they change us. He writes, “This truth is inevitably self-involving. It cannot

be adequately taken in unless we begin to be transformed... It has the urgency of the most relevant news—like someone shouting ‘Fire!’ or whispering, ‘Will you marry me?’”¹

If I understand the text, this is what happens to Mary. She began with questions of logistics. But as she realizes that the love of God will be born in the world, she is less concerned *how* this will happen and more changed by the fact that it *will* happen. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

A couple years ago my dad had a stroke and was dying. I jumped in the car and drove to Atlanta to say goodbye. It was a good visit. We said everything we needed to say. And we remembered some things together. We remembered what he called the “Ahhh, Dad” years. He called them that because it’s about all I would say during that season in my life. I was an early teen and I was unfortunately the son of the world’s most embarrassing father. I have been on both sides of that equation now, and when you happen to be the world’s most embarrassing father, it can be quite fun. But when you are the son of the world’s most embarrassing father, it is torture.

The “Ahhh, Dad” years are so named because it was the only way to address my father. He would say something and all I could say was, “Ahhh, Dad.” He would do something and, “Ahhh, Dad.” He couldn’t help it; he was just limited. He would pick me up from school. He would get out of the car and wave... “Over here!” “Ahhh, Dad. What are you doing getting out of the car? Can’t you see I have friends here?”

This is that period in time when dads take a nose-dive in intelligence. They go from almost being omniscient to knowing, well, nothing. When my son was 14 and going through this experience, my brother told him, “Your father has always been this dumb. It is only now that you realize it.”

Danny Martin, Frank Chambless and I were playing basketball in the driveway. Dad decided that he would join us. This is a man whose athletic skills were stretched a bit with playing checkers. He came out of the house wearing a t-shirt. I don’t mean one that had ‘Jayhawks’ plastered on it. I mean a Fruit of the Loom, v-neck, t-shirt. He wore plaid shorts. His legs looked like they had not seen sun or even bright

lights for a decade. He looked like he was walking on fluorescent light tubes. And these glowing legs disappeared into black socks and wingtips. He stepped out the back door. “You guys want to play some hoops?” My friends looked at him. They looked at me. “Ahhh, Dad.” Of course, times change. After I entered college, he got better.

It was March of 1987 and I took a train that rode through the night from Charleston, South Carolina to Richmond, Virginia. I was serving a church in Charleston. Carol was in school in Richmond. Carol didn’t know I was coming; I was planning to surprise her for her birthday. I had made reservations at The Tobacco Company restaurant in Richmond that served entrees that were way over budget for an Associate Pastor for youth ministry. The reservations were for 7:30 that night. The train arrived about 4:30 in the morning. I took a taxi to the school. I called her using a pay phone (remember those?) waking her and I convinced her to go to breakfast. I had an omelet. She had a pancake with an egg over easy. I realized as we finished our breakfast that I was far too nervous to wait until dinner to propose. We walked down Monument Avenue in Richmond in the midst of morning traffic and right there I proposed.

She laughed, which was not what I was hoping for. Recognizing that, she said, “Yes.” We decided we should tell our families. I called my dad. I said, “Dad, you remember Carol Wells?” “Of course, she’s wonderful.” “I agree,” I said. “I asked Carol to marry me.”

He said, “Just come on home.” “What?” “Just come on home, son. You don’t need to be by yourself at time like this. Just come on home.” “But, Dad, she said yes.” “She did? Wonderful! But she’s so smart...”

As he lay in that hospital bed set up in his condo, I thanked him for that. I told him he didn’t have to be so surprised that she said ‘yes,’ but I knew that he knew better than anyone in the world the reasons she might have said ‘no.’ And he still said, “Come on home. You are always welcome here.” He was no angel, but in his own way, he said, “With me, you are favored, you are loved, you belong.”

I suppose I could wonder how that happens, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? It just matters that it happens.

1 David Ford, *The Shape of Living* (1997) p. 10.

I think Mary had to have experienced something like that. The angel says, “You are going to be a mom because God has chosen you and that is because God loves you. And that love alive in you is what the world needs.” And Mary said, “I’m all in.”

Neither Mary nor we can fully explain how God’s love breathes in this world, but we can confess it to be true. For this love has transformed us. We have been transformed by the birth of this child “born of

woman as is every person, and yet born of God’s power as is no other person.”²

I don’t understand how all of this occurred and I don’t need to. What is life changing is that God chose to come to us. And the only possible reason is love. A love that says to you, “You are favored, you are loved.” God says, “You will always belong because I am your home. So just come on home.”

2 A Declaration of Faith, Our Confessional Heritage: Presbyterian Church U.S. Chapter 4, lines 10-14.