

Alright, I want to invite you to grab your Bibles, if you've got them with you, or you can grab one of the pew Bibles, and turn to Luke 1.

We are in our Advent series, looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in this early gospel chapter—how the Holy Spirit is, in many ways, the key player in the whole orchestration of the Christmas event, the event of Christ's coming to become one of us, His incarnation.

Last week I gave some background to the series, but just to briefly recap: We're looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in the events that led up to Christ's coming *so that* we can be more attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, particularly in this season.

Because the 'spirit' of Christmas is not a mood or a disposition or a feeling—it's a Person. We don't 'get into' the Christmas Spirit; we receive the Christmas Spirit. The Divine Person to whom this season really belongs. All the wonder and joy and delight is inspired by Him.

And so as best as we can, we want to engage with *this* Spirit, with the true Spirit of Christmas, to enter into the work that He's already doing, and to not only prepare our own hearts for the coming of Christ, and celebrating that wonderful reality, but like John the Baptist, to also—if not more importantly—prepare *others* for His coming.

To be priests and prophets who make a people ready for the coming of the King. And this next passage that we're looking at this morning gives us the key for how to do this. **Read Luke 1:26-38.**

This past week, I read an article about a daily prayer initiative that's been started in Ukraine. Not sure if you've heard of this, but apparently during the first year of full-scale war in Ukraine (2022), cities all around the country began to implement a daily minute of silence every morning at 9am.

The journalist who was writing this article had been to Ukraine and accounted her first experience of "this phenomenon."

She was walking through the city center of Ternopil, in Western Ukraine, and she heard this ticking sound over the loudspeakers. She wondered what it was and then noticed that everyone walking around her had suddenly stopped moving. They were just standing quietly.

She then noticed a woman bowing her head and making the sign of the cross. She—and all the others—were observing sixty seconds of silence. A full minute of prayer, asking God for peace, and also taking a moment to recognize that there were Ukrainians who did not survive the previous day.

Now, this past February, in response to three years of war, President Zelenskyy took this initiative a step further and made it a nationally recognized event. The whole country was invited to participate in these 60 seconds of silence and prayer every day.

So when this journalist went back to Ukraine in the spring, she noticed that at 9am every day, police would stop traffic. People would get out of their cars. Some getting down on their knees. The ticking sound came on, and there were sixty seconds of silence.

“Sixty seconds,” she writes, “where the complete strangers around me became prayer warriors for a nation desperate for divine intervention.”

In her article, she calls it nothing short of a miracle that an entire nation—kids in school classrooms, patrons in flowers shops and restaurants—would pause every day for 60 seconds to pray for divine intervention.

Last week we talked about the long 400+ years of silence that the people of Israel had experienced from God. No divine intervention anywhere. No prophets speaking on His behalf. No more prophetic words being written down as guidance. No sign of God anywhere.

And yet day after day, men and women like Zechariah and Elizabeth brought their prayers before Him—trusting that, if not in their lifetime, then God would come through in the next.

And not just for their own personal prayers, but for the rescue of their whole nation. For God to come through on their behalf. For Him to show up.

Little did they know that God was planning to show up in the most unexpected way.

Because what was so revolutionary about Zechariah and Elizabeth’s soon-to-be-born son was that he would have the presence of the Holy Spirit with him *before he was even born*. Already in the womb of Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit would be filling and preparing a man who would prepare the nation for the coming of the King.

And how the Spirit is active in *that* story prepares us to receive how the Spirit is active in *this* story.

Because look at what happens here. The angel, Gabriel, is again the one doing the announcing. It's the same heavenly figure, so you would think that it would be the same kind of context. But it's not.

To see an angel show up in the Temple and to a priest—what we saw last week—makes sense. But to see that same angel, then, show up in po-dunk Nazareth, probably in or just outside of a regular, run-down home, and to *a young woman*, a youth-aged girl maybe? That's different. We have not seen *this* before. This is not something that *any* religious tradition had ever seen before.

In other words, in the midst of war-torn and oppressed Israel, God's Spirit is doing something completely new. And apparently Mary is prepared to receive it.

Because look at how Gabriel greets her. V. 28 – *“The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.’”*

Now, naturally young Mary is confused by this, or ‘greatly troubled’ the text actually says. Because there’s no historical context or theological tradition to categorize this encounter. Powerful angels don’t approach young and seemingly insignificant girls. What would be the point in that? She doesn’t have any power or influence or importance.

But remember what we talked about in the story of the young servant girl in 2 Kings. Naaman’s servant girl, remember, who told him to go find the prophet Elijah so that he could be healed. God used a seemingly very insignificant child to point a very powerful man in the right direction.

And so Gabriel says to Mary, *“Do not be afraid.”* God is doing something, and you’re a part of it. It’s the same thing he said to Zechariah. Don’t be afraid. God is giving you a son.

However, the mysterious and biologically miraculous nature of *this* text isn’t that the woman is very old and unable to conceive, like Elizabeth was.

The mysterious and biologically miraculous nature of *this* text is that Mary doesn’t need anybody else to be involved in the process. Joseph isn’t included in this part of the story.

Isaiah 7:14 – *“The young woman [or virgin] will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”*

Here in v. 31: *“You [Mary] will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.”*

Here in this passage is finally the pronouncement that answers all of the Israelites’ prayers, because Gabriel tells Mary that a Messiah is coming. Someone who will be King and whose kingdom will never end.

And at first it seems like Mary responds similarly to how Zechariah responded to the angels’ words. “How can I be sure of this?” he said to Gabriel. “I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” “How will this be?” says Mary, “since I am a virgin?”

They sound very similar, but somehow it’s only Zechariah that gets a punishment and is rendered silent until his son is born. Why? Didn’t they both ask the same question?

Not entirely. It may look similar in English, but in the Greek these two questions take on very different tones. In English, both Zechariah and Mary ask “How?” How can? How will? But in the Greek, two different words are used.

For Zechariah, his 'how' question reads more like an allegation. Like, how can you expect me to believe this? It's a word that often means 'against.' He's combatting what the angel has said. How *can* this happen?

Mary, on the other hand, uses the actual word for 'how,' and so her question reads more like a simple curiosity. "How will this come to be?" She actually *receives* what Gabriel has said to her and is simply asking how it will happen. How *will* this come to be?

Which, when you understand it that way, is a very different response.

In that question alone, Mary indicates that she is prepared for the coming of the King, for divine intervention. For whatever it is that they've been praying for, no matter what it looks like.

John was tasked with making a people ready. *Mary* is already ready.

And it begs the question: are we? Are we ready for God to do something? Are we receptive to God moving? Are we looking for His Holy Spirit to be active and answering our prayers?

Think back to that story about Ukraine. Not everyone of course prays the same prayer or observes it the same way, but nonetheless, *there's* an example of a people who are eagerly hoping for God's activity. For divine intervention—whatever it looks like. For God to *do something*.

I mean, how many, do you think, in Ukraine are prepared to receive God's divine activity? How many are hungering for His Holy Spirit to move? Are looking every day for signs of His intervention? Probably quite a few.

Why? Because they know how much they need Him.

What do you think made Mary so receptive to all that Gabriel said to her? I don't think it was because her life was easy, so she just had a chill personality. In fact, it was probably the opposite.

Because it seems to be the case that God shows up most in the lives of those who are actively looking for Him. The regular pattern that we see in Scripture is that the Lord comes to those who cry out to him often *in desperation*, who have spent years praying for rescue, who are faced with impossible circumstances, who are disgraced by others, who have experienced great loss, who don't fit the typical mold of success or significance.

I mean, we don't know Mary's story, but maybe she suffered a great loss in her life that helped to shape who she is. Maybe like Esther, she was actually an orphan adopted by an uncle or a grandparent. Maybe she had a disability, a speech impediment, or a limp. Maybe she lived in poverty and the family was running out of options for their own survival.

Maybe she was someone who—because of her circumstances—was desperately longing for the Kingdom of God to *come*. Someone who was *steeped* in the stories and faithfulness of God so much so that the words of the angel do not scare her.

As New Testament scholar Will Barclay put it: “Mary had learned (somehow) to forget the world’s commonest prayer—“Thy will be *changed*” and to pray the world’s greatest prayer—“Thy will be *done*.”

Like I said earlier, Mary was *ready*. Ready to receive. We don’t know why, or what equipped her for this moment. But it’s often our trials and a recognition of our brokenness that opens us up to receive the Christ of Christmas.

The journalist who wrote about the prayers in Ukraine, Sharyn Borodina, wrote this in her article:

“There can be beauty in our brokenness when we allow Jesus to enter into our pain [perhaps as Mary did]. When we recognize in our powerlessness, in our desperation, in our loss, that our Heavenly Father means it when he says he will never leave us or forsake us. When there is nowhere else to turn, that is the moment that we so often find the unexpected. That bright light of hope.... Hope in the valley of the shadow of darkness.... Hope that Jesus holds us, loves us, and is working powerfully through our prayers. When there is nothing left to lose, or when we are on the brink of losing everything, may we finally understand the message of the Gospel....”

The Gospel. The good news. That Jesus came, yes, and that he died and rose again—but for what purpose?

To gift us with the presence and power of His Holy Spirit, as He did with Mary. The Spirit who seeks to overshadow *us* and reveal the truth of Jesus Christ our Messiah *to us*.

Vs. 35: “*The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the son of God.’*”

The Holy *Spirit* will come on you, Mary. Literally He will arrive upon you, and the *power* of Almighty God will overshadow you, or envelop you in a cloud is another way of putting it.

In other words, you will be completely surrounded and utterly invaded by the presence of the Holy Spirit. By God’s Almighty *power*.

See, power and Spirit go hand-in-hand. Last week we saw the Holy Spirit’s power *filling* someone before they were even born. Now the Holy Spirit is powerfully *forming* someone before they even have a body.

The Holy Spirit planted Jesus in Mary. The Holy Spirit—in partnership with Mary's DNA—formed the human body of Jesus.

Mary is the first person in Scripture to have the Spirit dwelling within her. To have the Spirit do a good work within her. To have the Spirit reveal Christ within her.

And as I said last week, I am convinced that the Holy Spirit wants to do the same with us. Not in the exact same fashion, of course, but with the same ultimate purpose: to equip us for the coming of the King. To fill us and partner with us as He did with Mary so that we are a people who not just prepare ourselves but also prepare others for His coming.

Are we receptive to this? Are we ready to receive Him, no matter what it might look like? No matter what He might ask us to do?

What if *we* were a people who daily took—even just 60 seconds—to pray that we would see the movement of God's Holy Spirit? That we would see divine intervention, not just in our country, but in and through *us*?

Because in this encounter with Mary, God proved that His desire is to infuse us with the power of His Holy Spirit so that He can be where we are. To make our own bodies and hands and feet and minds and hearts a place for divine activity.

To make us a holy dwelling, a place where His Spirit can move. Because nothing is impossible.

That same Holy Spirit that formed Christ in Mary wants to form Christ in you today. It doesn't matter how small or unworthy you are. He favours the insignificant. It doesn't matter how broken or empty you feel. He fills the unfillable. It doesn't matter how young or old you are. He makes the impossible possible.

And His desire is to so reveal Christ to you and *in* you that you don't simply hope for His coming; you *expect* it. So that we don't push against the impossible, like Zechariah did, but instead receive it like Mary and invite the Lord to show us how He plans to make it happen.

To ask, not how *can* this happen, but how *will* this happen? How *will* I see your Holy Spirit move?

How *will* I see your Spirit move in my neighbour who isn't interested in conversation. In my uncle who's an alcoholic. In my son or daughter who has lost their faith. In my friend who needs love and community but won't accept my help? In my own broken heart that can't manage another holiday season?

How *will* your Spirit move? In my own heart, and them? Show me that the impossible is possible.

I recently came across a book of poems all relating to “God’s expected coming,” and in it there is a poem specifically about Mary. It says this:

Young. Brown.
From *that* side of town.
And now
with a baby
on the way.

You call her blessed?
I’ve heard her called worse things....

No wonder she is troubled
by this greeting.
But they can’t see
what You see....

Overshadowed.
The Spirit hovers,
and she is covered.
Ready to birth
new creation.
Delivering us
salvation.

Overshadowed. The Spirit hovers. And you too are covered.

Are you ready? Are you prepared to be a part of what the Spirit is doing? Are you ready to join in His work of making new creation for salvation in Jesus’ name?

Are you ready to receive Him this Christmas?
