

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Availability vs. Ability

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 2011

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Luke 1:26-38

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

It's that time of year again: Christmas Day is next Sunday. When we're trying to explain Christmas to little children we often say "It's Jesus' birthday." But if you think about it, Jesus' birthday is very different from other birthdays we celebrate throughout the year, even our own. For one thing, even though scholars for two thousand years have researched it thoroughly, nobody knows the date of Jesus' birth. On the other hand, we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday, which is January 15, or George Washington's birthday on

February 22, or Lincoln's birthday on February 12—they've been combined into "Presidents' Day." We know the dates. The second difference is that we remember these people on their birthdays because of the great things they accomplished. These were people who made a real difference in the world.

But we remember their birthdays because of their accomplishments as adults. Some biographer may have done enough research to find out the circumstances of Martin Luther King's or George Washington's or Abraham Lincoln's birth, but their births are not why we remember their birthdays. It's their lives and accomplishments that have put their names on the calendar.

But when it comes to Jesus, two of the four accounts we have of his life—Matthew and Luke--also go into not only how he was born, but how he was conceived. Why is this? Certainly Jesus did many remarkable things during his life. His most remarkable accomplishment is rising from the dead after having been horribly executed by his enemies as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole human race.

But why does Luke go into such intimate detail as he describes Mary's encounter with the archangel Gabriel? Gabriel gives us the answer: **"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."**

Strictly speaking, Christmas commemorates Jesus' *birth*, not Jesus' birthday. It's not his life-and-death accomplishments we celebrate because Jesus was born. What matters is that God, in his inexplicable love for the human race, caused his Son to be conceived in the body of a young woman and grow up to be a human being, specifically a man, who is the Lord and Savior of the human race. This is why we know so much about his birth.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth aren't just important because they're miraculous, in the sense that a virgin becomes pregnant. What's more important is that two categories of being which had been absolutely separate come together as one in Mary's womb. You've probably seen the statues of ancient gods where a hawk's head is on a man's neck, or a goat's legs on a human's torso. These are ridiculous biological impossibilities. Nobody could ever imagine that such an individual actually walked the earth.

But in Jesus we have something that is even more fantastic and remote from human experience: God himself being born from a human mother and called **"the Son of God."** This is beyond miraculous. Ancient religions are full of myths about gods becoming human beings. The Roman emperors, along with

those in Egypt, China and Japan were considered gods because their subjects worshiped them by being loyal to the state.

But in Jesus the Sovereign Ruler and Creator of the Universe became a human being. He is holy, not because people worship him, but people worship him because he is holy. This is the stupendous, unimaginable reality that we focus on every Christmas. Its implications for us are literally without limit. The re-creation of the Universe, the ultimate judgment and eradication of all sin, evil, cruelty and oppression, the restoration of repentant sinner to physical, spiritual and moral perfection, all of these and more center in this single human being, Jesus.

There's much more I could say, but there's another stupendous reality in this gospel reading I'd like to consider, and that is where and through whom God chooses to have his Son born. Luke tells us that God sends the archangel Gabriel **“to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.”** Galilee was nowhere. From the perspective of a faithful Jew who worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem, Galilee was the wrong side of the tracks. But that's not all; Nazareth itself had a bad reputation. When Philip told Nathanael he had found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael said, **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** **(John 1:46)**

And then there's Mary. Women in Jewish society in those days were not thought of very highly, and Mary isn't a woman, she's only a girl. Girls usually married young, in their early teens. The God of the Universe, the Holy and only wise architect of reality and Lord of human history, chooses a teenage girl and her boyfriend to bring up the divine man who is his Son. Mary is often described as “humble,” and she is. She is **“perplexed”** at being addressed by the angel as **“favored one.”** You can almost imagine her looking behind herself to make sure he wasn't talking to someone else. “Who, me?”

But Mary is also humble in the sense that she was utterly insignificant socially, religiously, politically—in any way. She had no connections or status or education. She had no training or preparation. And yet she agrees to take on the greatest responsibility any mother could be asked to. As I've heard it put, Mary had no ability. All she had was availability.

In the eyes of the world, Mary of Nazareth was insignificant. Yet God chose her and honored her and blessed her beyond any human being except her first-born son, Jesus. Could she have said a polite “no thank you” to the angel's prophecy? I suppose so. She could have said, “Look, I'm not married, I'm only engaged. Find someone else who's more suitable and has some children already, someone with more experience. It'll be better for everybody.” Instead, she made

herself available: **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”**

Are you significant? Am I? We may not think so, but people all over the world right now are struggling to have what we have, to live where we live and how we live. We have means of travel, and communication and the freedom to exercise them that no civilization in the history of the world has every enjoyed before. And we have heard and received the good news that Mary’s Son has come to be the Savior of all humanity!

Do we have training and preparation and ability to share this gospel of God according to his eternal plan? Probably not. But God chooses the available, not the able. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul the spiritual giant stops right in the middle of describing how the eternal destiny of real people is at stake in his preaching the gospel to ask in wonderment, **“Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16)** The answer, of course, is “no one!” Not Mary, not Paul, not you, not I.

Over the past year you have heard many exhortations to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ, to mention Jesus to people who need to know him, to become active in announcing and demonstrating the purpose and direction of God in Jesus Christ here at St. Matthew’s. If anyone here believes they are incompetent to do this, learn this from God himself: he chooses not the able, but the available.

Let us pray.

O God, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and all the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*