Luke 1:26-38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Luke chapter 1 verses 26 to 38. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And 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. And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? 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 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.
But nothing will be impossible with God. And 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.
[1:24] In Luke chapter 1, the angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary in a city of Galilee called Nazareth. This is not the first time we have met the angel Gabriel. The angel Gabriel has already appeared to Zechariah in the temple to announce the birth of John. But in the book of Daniel, the angel Gabriel appears in Daniel chapter 8 verse 16 and chapter 9 verse 21, where he declares the fates of nations and of empires. And his appearance again at this point evokes that background. This is going to be an event that occurs on the stage of the empires, on the stage of the great kingdoms. It's the story of the kingdoms playing out and the empires playing out and then their faith, the one that's going to come as the king of the Jews, the one who's going to fulfill God's great purposes for his people.

Now, John and Jesus and the annunciation of their births seem to be connected together here. John is the great prophet like Samuel, who's going to anoint and announce the coming king.
And Jesus is the Davidic king, who's going to fulfill the purpose of his father David. It's important that Mary is betrothed to a man of the house of David. Christ's royal heritage comes through Joseph in particular, and Joseph is all too easily neglected in our tellings of the story of Jesus' nativity.
Nevertheless, within Luke, there is a particular focus upon the women at the beginning of the gospel. Why is this? I think there are a number of reasons. But first of all, I think we should notice that God's great works in history often begin with an emphasis upon women.
And women struggling in birth. We can think about the story of the Exodus. The story of the Exodus begins with the Hebrew midwives, with Miriam, with Jochebed, with Pharaoh's daughter. All of these characters are important within that context. Likewise, the beginning of 1 Samuel. The story of the kingdom begins with Hannah praying in the temple. And at the beginning of Luke, we see similar things. It's the story of Elizabeth, the story of Mary, the story of Anna who prays in the temple.
The story of the gospel in Luke's telling does not begin on the thrones of kings. It does not begin in the courts of the cities. It begins in an out-of-the-way place, in a city of Galilee called Nazareth, and with a young woman who's being told by an angel. The angel who's involved in these prophecies concerning empires given to Daniel at the very heart of that great empire, and now appearing to someone out in the sticks. God's kingdom works very differently from the kingdoms of men. Mary is blessed in much the same language as Jael in Judges chapter 5 verse 24. Most blessed of women

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be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent women most blessed. Jael, of course, was the head-crushing woman who defeated Sisera. And Mary's song later on, the Magnificat, is like Hannah's from 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 1 to 10. Mary is cut from the same cloth as the great heroines of the Old Testament.
[4:28] Again, this is a story of God proving his power over the womb, that the womb, whether it's barren, whether it is the virgin's womb, that God is powerful to bring life from that womb.

The virgin birth once more reminds us that the kingdom is not spread by man's virility. In the Old Testament that's brought home by the rite of circumcision, and the means by which Abraham is made fruitful, is through promise, not through the flesh. And that point could not be more emphasised here. Mary's child will be born by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by any action of man. And the way this promised child is described is important because it's kingdom themes that are prominent.
Jesus will be the Davidic king, the deliverer of his people. The spirit overshadows Mary, just as it hovered over the waters of creation at the very beginning, and just as it covered the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 40. And this should help us to understand some of the things that are going on here. It's a new creation. There's a new man, the last Adam being formed. Likewise, there's a tabernacle theme. The tabernacle is being inhabited by God's presence. As the tabernacle could represent the bride in relationship to the bridegroom, so Mary is now a sort of tabernacle bearing the presence of the Lord within her. And perhaps we should also hear themes of the reversal of the fall. We can talk about the blessed fruit of Mary's womb. The womb, which once mediated judgment to the woman, now becomes the means of blessing. The means by which she will fulfil the promise that was given at the very beginning, that the child of the woman would defeat the serpent, would crush its head. Jesus is the seed of the woman, and he's the seed of the woman in particular, as Mary is a virgin. Adam was dead as a result of his sin, and Eve was the mother of all living. And the promised seed comes primarily in the relationship between God and the womb of the woman, not with the agency of man. The description of the
Holy Spirit coming upon Mary, and the power of the Most High overshadowing her, should also alert us to connections with the beginning of Acts, where that is something very similar to the promise that's given to the church, that the Spirit will come upon them, and that they will be clothed with power from on high. That's the promise that they are given, and that's what happens at Pentecost. Many have seen in this event a sort of Marian Pentecost, and I think they're right to do so. The Spirit is coming upon Mary in the same way as the Spirit will later come upon the church. The church will bear Christ within it as a new temple, and Mary here is a sort of temple, bearing the presence of the Lord in her womb.
Birth from the Virgin's womb is a sign of things changing, of new things happening, things that were formerly deemed impossible. And the angel Gabriel declares to Mary that her relative Elizabeth is already conceiving a son in her old age, and that nothing will be impossible with God. This is a sign of things to come. Things are changing. Old expectations will no longer hold true. God is going to act, and he's going to change and transform the situation. Mary's response is one of profound faith. She gives herself to the Lord as his servant and handmaid. She willingly accepts the vocation that has been laid upon her, a vocation that's not just about bearing a child to term, but about living the entirety of her life as the mother of this child, the mother of the Messiah, with all the tragedy, with all the uncertainty, with all the difficulty that that will involve.
[8:15] A question to consider. How can we regard Mary as a sort of archetype of the church?

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