

Selected Sermons #2

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 1:26-38 2nd Sunday in Advent

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "*Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, his kingdom will never end.*"

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.*"

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "*May it be to me as you have said.*" Then the angel left her.

In Christ Jesus, whose birthday we welcome again in faith –

We call ourselves a company of believers, and we say it of ourselves with great pride and joy – as indeed we should – yet we are also speaking these days of preparing ourselves for Christmas, and that is a matter of deep concern to us. What do we really need for Christmas besides faith? Is it not enough that we believe that the Son of God came into our flesh to be our Savior from sin? Such faith is truly the one and only need of people, according to the word of the Lord himself, **“that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”** (John 3:15)

Last Sunday we came to admit that even the best child of God needs preparation because the true Christmas faith finds the human heart a poor place to rest in and grow. God must take special and sometimes painful measures to assure a real welcome for his Son even in the hearts of believers. This is true not only because of the nature of sinful, unspiritual, human flesh and blood that is always contrary to the love of God but also because of our natural lack of real strength, for Christmas faith needs strength – the strength of great courage, and such courage God must build up in us. We find our present Gospel pointing us to that fact and thus helping us in our preparation for Christmas. The lovely, thrilling example of Mary will teach and awaken in us a most vital quality, namely –

The great courage of the Christmas faith:

I. As it was manifest in Mary

II. As it should be exhibited in us.

I. In a far greater sense than Zacharias the aged priest and father of John, the Virgin Mary faced a critical situation when Gabriel the messenger of God entered her room six months after his appearance in the temple. In many ways she was as well equipped as Zacharias to welcome the angel and his message, for Gabriel was only announcing the fulfillment of an old promise of God to the house of David. Some day, as all who knew the Word of God had heard, a king would be born in David's line whose kingdom would be everlasting. Mary was a member of the family of David and was, moreover, a true child of God. The promises she believed; she waited for that great King.

But let us consider what she faced when her Christmas faith, as we may now call it, was put to the test. The first thing that naturally came to her mind was the unreasonableness of the angel's salutation. "*Blessed are you among women.*" We hear that she was troubled at that, and well she might. First of all, she was but a virgin. Luther reminds us that she may well have been not more than fifteen years of age at that time, for she was but engaged to Joseph, and in Oriental countries women often married at a much earlier age than is customary among us. No more than a girl she was, and very lowly besides, of

humble station in life, engaged to a carpenter. How unfitting the greeting must have sounded, to hear that of all the women in the world, she was the most highly blessed!

The next hard blow to Mary's mind was the announcement that she would bring forth a son. We can almost hear her gasp at the shock: *How can this be, since I do not know a man?* That which must be a shame and disgrace to any other woman (to bear a child out of wedlock) is to happen to her, and by a heavenly decision she is called *highly favored* because of it. Though the manner of its taking place is not hidden from her, it comes like a dream figure out of another world. *And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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."*

Mothers are usually tenderly proud of their children and have no trouble in picturing for them a great future – but no mother in her right mind is going to look forward to a son who shall be known as *the Son of the Highest*, who shall rule as King forever and ever, and who comes from her womb a *Holy One* – yet all these statements fall like mighty stones upon the heart of the virgin. Miracle is piled upon miracle, and all is to be of her and for her!

Do we imagine that it was easy for Mary to accept the truth of the Christmas to come? To be a child of God and believe promises is one thing; to accept in faith the immense power and love of God in making the promises actually come true to one is another thing again! Try to put yourself into Mary's position – and let us above all do away with the many inventions about Mary that have made of her something she never was. She has been made a little god; we are told that she herself was born without sin, and that the angel said *blessed among women* because she was different from every other woman in the world. All of this is pure make-believe; she was an Israelitic girl engaged to a carpenter named Joseph; no more than that, and no less.

Mary was a sinner; she was utterly human, not divine. She deserved nothing and was simply chosen by God out of his infinite, unreachable wisdom as the mother of his Son. Does not the angel plainly say just that? She is *highly favored*; she is *blessed*. What does that mean? It means to have someone greater than you show you favor, love, grace and mercy. A favor is undeserved; it is a gift. Whoever receives such a gift is blessed.

What **courage** it took for Mary to believe that of herself! Yes, courage, for it contradicted everything that Mary knew of herself. All the opposite might have been true, but not this! Just as a man climbing a height must

have the courage to simply put out of his mind the distance to the ground and set aside the thought of falling, so **Mary's faith depended upon her courage** to put aside what seemed really true of her, and to set before her what seemed impossible and unreasonable.

How did she do that? Where did she find such courage? She found it in complete trust in God's Word. Mary did not reason with herself or God; she asked questions yes, but she understood the answers no better than before. The more the angel spoke, the more impossible everything got – but at the same time, every word of the angel was a word of God, and **every word gave Mary new courage**. Finally, she simply held on to the Word of God, then. You notice her say, *“Let it be to me according to your word.”* Here was where Mary differed from Zacharias – he failed, asking at the end for a sign. Mary hung to the words – she was going to hold God to what he said. **That gave her courage, and courage strengthened faith.**

In this she was like people of God before her; like Abraham, who found courage to believe in the impossible by holding to the Word; like the three men who went into the fiery furnace with courage of faith that overcame the heat by clinging to the promise that it would not be too hot; and like David, who walked into the valley of death, fearing no evil because he held to God's Word – and like them, so

must we be. Mary is but our example of the Christmas faith and its **great courage which should be exhibited also in us.**

II. Let us speak frankly of our Christmas faith and confess how difficult it is for us to believe rightly the Christmas message. We say this because our problem is no different from Mary's. The bare facts of Christmas are certainly simple enough to grasp, as they were also for the virgin. No child of God has ever failed to appreciate the meaning in the promises of God. It was his eternal plan of salvation to send a great King out of the house of David to appear on earth and deliver people from their sins. This King was to be born of a virgin, and he should be called "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 8:6) All this we can accept as true, for we know the mightiness of God. We can accept the fact that Mary was that virgin (why shouldn't she be?), and that the Holy One born of her was the eternal Son of God.

So far, Christmas is just a story of mighty, historical facts. Those things happened, for with God nothing is impossible. I can and I must accept those facts, for the evidence is there. That does not take courage - it takes only plain honesty. Why deny what cannot be denied? But now the Christmas facts become personal. You remember that this was what gave Mary her trouble - not that it should happen, but that it should happen to her.

Remember how shocked she was at being called *highly favored and blessed among women*.

Ah, yes, this is where **the heart** becomes troubled and **seeks courage** to believe, for I ask, “*Why should this happen to me?*” The Child in the manger is not hard to look at, but then God speaks to you and to me personally and says, “*Rejoice, highly favored one.*” Among all millions of people on earth, see how you are blessed, and what favor God shows you! For this is your child, and this is your Savior. He came especially to die for you! He knew your name, and he shouldered your sins. When he planned his kingdom, he put a chair in it for you.

The Child of Bethlehem is born to you! What does it matter which virgin gave to the Son of God his body and life? He was there before her, for he is the eternal Son of God, and he wants to be born in you, too. You are to be his dwelling and his manger, to drive out all sin and enter in, to be born in you today.

Now there is trouble in our souls, for we see the realities before us as Mary did. Our sense tells us that there is nothing here for us and nothing before us but death and hell. No Son of God, no seat in heaven, but only the wrath of God which must fall upon our heads and consume us because we have been evil and have gone astray. It is not God’s favor that we see or dare to look for.

David saw the valley of the shadow of death; Abraham saw his dying body; the men awaiting the fiery furnace saw others consumed by its white heat. And what is our valley but dark? On every side we note the evidence of what our sin has done to us and our world. Because we have been disobedient and loved not righteousness nor holiness but always greed and voluptuous living, therefore we tremble before sickness and disease, pain and loss – and the Earth is filled with the smoke of destruction.

To believe in the Christ of Christmas, in Jesus, the child of the love of God, **we must have courage.** Not the false kind of courage which pretends that there is no death and no curse upon us but the courage which looks away from the realities of life to the greater love of God. There is our sin and unworthiness; there is horror in this world, and the flames of it lick out and touch us; there is grief, there is sickness, and it is only what we deserve.

But there is much more! There is the fact that Christ is born for you and for me, that he is our Savior! **Courage to believe this lies in simple trust in the Word and promise of God.** Be it unto us according to his will! He wills that we will shine gloriously in the new Kingdom; he wills that in all our weakness we will live already here with heads high and with step sure, walking in his way. No matter what other evidence says, his Word is higher and greater!

As Mary was comforted and **strengthened in her courage** by the example of Elizabeth, so too will we be upheld by the example of Mary. No greater things happened to her than are happening to us, for the love of God is the same. Before Christmas arrives, you or I may have to face severe darkness. A son may be lost on the battlefield, and the world may move and totter in its rounds, destroying much of what we hold dear. Oh, may we, when Christmas comes, have the courage that God's Word gives to face Christmas with the word, "All this is for me! Ok, how rich I am!" Amen!

Ye sons of men, Oh, hearken #75

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates #73

Behold, a Branch is growing #645