

The Annunciation

A sermon by Rev. Eric H. Carswell

Modified and preached by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn,

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Children's Talk: Trusting the Lord's Word

What does it mean to trust someone? It means believing that what they say is true. If you trust your mom, and she tell you that dinner will be spaghetti, you believe that it will be spaghetti. If she says that she will be there to pick you up after school, you believe that she will be there.

Our story today is about a woman named Mary. She was told something by an angel that she found hard to trust or to believe.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then 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 bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give 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."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Mary found it very hard to believe the angel when he told her that she would give birth to Jesus. But Mary, when the angel explained how the Lord would make it happen, trusted the Lord and she believed that He could do things that seemed impossible to her.

It is easy to trust someone when they say that they will do something for us that is easy. It is a lot harder to trust someone when they say they will do something that seems impossible.

What are some things that God tells us that seem impossible? Some of them are in the Word:

- Jesus fed thousands of people with just a little bread
- Jesus walked on water
- Jesus came back to life after they tried to kill Him

Some of them have to do with the things that God says about us:

- You can stop doing bad things
- You'll be able to absolutely love helping and working hard
- You can live forever in heaven, where nothing bad can hurt you

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What amazing words these must have been to the young woman, Mary, when she first heard them. Just minutes before she had probably been engaged in some mundane task of daily life in her mother's home, perhaps grinding flour or baking bread, maybe weaving or spinning wool into yarn. If she was like most young women who are shortly to be married, her mind would have been turned to her future life with Joseph, what their home would be like, the children they would have and the life that they would lead together. Happy images of the future would have filled her thoughts. She would have had her hopes, dreams and expectations – images of how her life would be as the future wife of Joseph.

Suddenly with the appearance of the angel Gabriel, her visions of the future contained a new and dramatically different element. The angel told her that she was highly favored and blessed among women, that the Lord was with her and that she would soon conceive and bring forth a son whose name would be Jesus. This child would be given the throne of Mary's ancient relative, King David, and reign forever.

Mary voiced the question of how this would take place. She knew the order of natural conception and knew that the angel's message did not fit into this order. In explanation the angel Gabriel told her of the greatest miracle of all time saying, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

We are called to believe that miracles do occur. Some people are troubled by the idea of miracles based on their picture of cause and effect in this world. They have accepted that the only causes are natural ones – the laws of physics and so

on. For such a person the idea of Jesus being born without a natural father is fantastic beyond belief.

But we are called to believe that miracles have and do occur. There are forces that attack this belief. We have grown up in a culture that has a strong sense of natural order. Science today is capable of explaining so many events that previously were mysteries. It is capable of explaining them by means of fundamental laws of nature.

For some this sense of natural law can become so strong that the Lord's active presence within creation vanishes. For some there is no Divine intervention within this system. All is fixed and moves along with changes taking place by mere random accident. But it could be noted that according to natural law most changes result in more chaos, not less chaos. Changes tend toward the breakdown of a higher order into a lower one.

Think of the example of a person quickly typing out a document on a computer. You would expect that errors would be introduced into the typing. What is the likelihood that the errors would improve the original document? It's possible, but rather unexpected. But the argument for pure natural evolution is that given enough time and the forces of natural selection life as we now know it has developed.

Asserting that human life came about purely by random accidents starting with the genetic code of the most primitive life millions of years ago seems akin to saying that given enough time and enough typed copies a simple child's nursery rhyme could evolve into a Shakespearean play without any plan or higher thought being involved.

We are called to believe that miracles do occur. However, the Writings for the New Church have taught us that we are not to expect to see the miracles of the Old

and New Testaments performed today in the same way they were performed in the time those books were written. We read:

The reason miracles are not done at this day, as before, is that miracles compel, and take away free will in spiritual things; and from being spiritual, they make a person natural. All in the Christian world . . . can become spiritual; and they become spiritual solely from the Lord through the Word; and the faculty for this would perish if they were brought to believe through miracles. (*True Christian Religion* §501)

Partially based on statements such as this, a person can come to a pattern of thinking that does not believe in the Lord's ability to affect things for good in a miraculous way even today. A person could believe in God, but still tend to view the progression of his or her life as following laws of a machine-like system. Anything that does not fit into this fixed system is believed to be a miracle that would take away spiritual freedom – the very freedom that the Lord was born into the world to re-establish.

Perhaps, though, it is too easy for us to become too limited in our view – so limited that we block out of sight of the miracles that can occur within our own lives without taking away our spiritual freedom. Perhaps it is too easy for this limited point of view to block out a sense of the Lord's presence – of the Holy Spirit's presence. How does the Lord reach out to touch our lives?

What of Mary's life? The events surrounding the first Christmas were a major intervention within her life. The same is true of her husband to be, Joseph. Both of them could have denied the possibility of a miraculous conception and this state of denial would have been far more damaging than that of Zacharias.

Could the Lord's birth ever have taken place if Mary was not willing to accept the angel's words? Her firstborn was to have a continuing effect throughout her whole life. His presence was not without many events that brought a sense of awe and wonder to both Mary and Joseph. We know of at least one event that showed

that raising Jesus was not always easy. At age 12, they spent three anxious days searching for Him, only to find Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of teachers, listening and asking questions.

In addition to the way in which Jesus' birth and life intervened in Joseph's and Mary's life, think of the way His presence affected the disciples. Many of them were happily going about their daily jobs when they were called to leave all behind and follow Him. While this intervention sometimes involved something of the miraculous, it also involved an element of free will.

Just as Joseph and Mary could have resisted the words of the angel announcing that the Lord would be born, so also the disciples could have heard the Lord call them to follow and shook their heads and returned to their work. There were many, many others who were influenced in this same way. Many others who heard the Lord's words calling to them and had their lives profoundly influenced by what He said.

The Lord comes to each of us in our lives many times each day. While we may not have anything occur in our lives that an objective observer would call miraculous, it is not true that our lives will follow some pre-established route, set by our inborn nature and directed by compelling experience of the natural world.

The Lord's first birth represents the way in which He comes in any age to anyone who will receive Him. Just as the words of the angel Gabriel would have been a dramatic intervention within the happy normalcy of the future that Mary would have envisioned, so also the Lord can come to us announcing the conception of a future for us that is far different from the one our natural mind would envision.

The Lord comes to us offering and promising a far different set of reactions to daily events from the ones we presently have – a different perspective, a far greater

patience in some areas and a stronger resolve and commitment in others. He comes to us bringing light to areas of thoughts that we had resigned ourselves to being in deep darkness and bringing warmth to much that we might otherwise have done from need or duty.

The angel Gabriel was sent to a virgin, whose name was Mary. There are two distinct reasons for the importance of a belief in the virgin birth. One reason has to do with the essential need for Jesus to be born with a natural mother but without a natural father if He was going to become our Savior and Redeemer. It was crucial for the work of Jesus that He not derive from His birth any of the internal evils that are passed on through the soul provided by the natural father in any natural conception.

His soul and life came directly from the infinite God. His developing mind and life were the ever more perfect manifestation in human form of the Father and creator, our Lord and God. But it was important that He take on a natural mind at first empty of any experience and knowledge as you and I were born with. It was important that He take on the hereditary inclinations to evil that birth to a natural mother brought to His life.

The second reason for believing in the virgin birth exists because of the representation of the term virgin and what this says about how the Lord comes to us in our lives. We are told that a virgin represents someone who is willing to have his or her life affected by truth. In this story, Mary represents a state of mind in each of our lives that is not controlled by self-interest nor committed to a determined course of action. It is a state of mind that is open to new possibilities.

The Lord comes to each of us bringing the promise of a new conception of life just as the angel Gabriel came to the virgin Mary. He comes promising a rebirth or regeneration of life that is radically different from the one we come by naturally. It is

not to the hustle and bustle of established life that He appears, but rather to those states of mind that, like the virgin Mary, look forward to something new and different and most importantly are willing to receive the conception of this new life.

The life that comes to us naturally, apart from any presence of the Lord, is like a child conceived of a human father and mother. Without the Lord's presence, this life cannot have any other basis than self-interest and worldly concern. Experience may teach us to broaden this self-interest and to temper these concerns, but apart from the Lord's advent within our lives they will never rise above this level.

The Lord is born within each of our lives within the states of mind that are willing to be affected by what the Word teaches – by the states of mind that are willing to rise above the prompting of our natural inclinations to be self-serving and natural in our interests, thoughts and actions.

He is born within the states of mind that are willing to turn outward to recognize and serve the needs of those around us. He is born within the states of mind that are willing to recognize that natural things exist to serve the needs of mankind and creation as a whole and have their proper uses as well as their abuses.

Our preparation for the celebration of Christmas, more than any other event of the season, tends to turn people outward to others. It is a time that can help us to recognize the community of caring people that we live in. And it is a time that can remind us that many are in need – there are many people who can use our help.

This help may be a matter of providing food, clothing and shelter for those have not been able to or have not yet come to be provident enough to provide them for themselves. It can be a matter of giving a hand to someone who could use some help with a job, sharing some burden with that person.

Christmas is a time when we give gifts that symbolize love and friendship for others. The most lasting gifts are those that we give when we recognize the spiritual needs of others – when we recognize that, by our words and actions, we can help the Lord bring loving warmth to another person's life.

We, by our words and actions, can bring the light of greater understanding to another person's life. We have the capability of helping others receive far greater blessings in life than they might otherwise. Our preparation for and celebration of Christmas can remind us of how a truly Christian life is one of wisely giving and of serving. The state of mind that receives this reminder is the one imaged by the virgin, Mary.

The Lord comes to each of us in our lives, just as the angel Gabriel came to Mary. He comes telling of events that can take place, if we are willing, which far exceed anything we might picture ourselves. He promises us a new life, born within our own, but not taking its source from us. He promises the presence of the Holy Spirit within this new life. He comes with a miraculous intervention in the natural course of events.

The words of the angel Gabriel to Mary are also words to us with the promise of a new life that will profoundly affect what we care about, think and do each day throughout the year. These words are the promise of a new life for each of us. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary, so the Lord would say to us:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.