

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ 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. ... ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-35,38)

Who is this Child?

A couple of years ago, my wife's sister came to visit us. At that time, her youngest child wasn't even a year old. My sister-in-law put her down for a nap and once she was asleep, she and my wife went shopping. Well, of course, that baby woke up while they were gone and realized that she was in a strange place with a man she didn't recognize and she was very unhappy. I tried all my best quiet-the-baby tricks but nothing worked. Finally, I got a brainstorm. I knew that there were all these teachers over here at school working and they are just much more maternal than I am. So I brought her over hoping that maybe she'd decide that she liked them better. When I walked in holding a baby, you know what question those teachers asked me, right? "Who is this?" **Who is this child?** We don't really need to ask that question at Christmas, do we? Most of us have a manger scene in our house and at the center is a baby. Christmas cards and Christmas carols and Christmas decorations repeat that baby motif over and over again. We all know that this is the Christ child – or "baby Jesus" as many of our children would say. But do we always remember what that means? Sad to say, it seems that more and more, we Americans are forgetting the centrality of that child to Christmas. The only way to restore him to his rightful place is to remember who he really is.

I.

Who is this child? He is the son of Mary. That's very clear from the reading we just heard. Obviously, this reading comes nine months before the famous account in the next chapter of Luke which describes the birth in Bethlehem. But it is about the baby to be born there. That baby is the child of Mary. Luke tells us that Mary was **"a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph."** She was engaged if we can use that modern term. But engagement then was different than it is today. It was a much more binding pledge. Even though they were not formally married, Mary certainly still lived with her family, she could not have "broken it off" with Joseph without a formal divorce proceeding. And in Jewish society at that time, she was probably quite young by our standards, most likely in her middle teens. Her husband-to-be, Joseph, may have been older than she was. There's a church tradition that says he was actually an elderly man, but the Bible in no way backs that up. And from everything that we see her doing and saying in the Bible, we can draw one more conclusion about Mary: she was a devout Jew. She probably came from a family that regularly attended worship services at the synagogue and that carefully followed the Old Testament laws that God gave his people. Certainly, Mary consistently showed that she trusted in God.

To this unmarried, believing girl, the angel Gabriel brought a stunning announcement: **"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."** In almost every conversation with an angel that the Bible records, at some point the angel says, "Don't be afraid!" Why is that so common? Because when a sinner suddenly finds himself or herself in the presence of a holy angel, they can't help but feel their sin and be afraid of God's judgment. Even though Mary was clearly a believer, she was not sinless. She, too, naturally was afraid of the angel.

Once he calmed her fears, he told her: **"You will be with child and give birth to a son."** But notice the line right before that. Gabriel says, **"You have found favor with God."** In Greek – the language the New

Testament was written in – the word for favor is actually “grace.” The angel actually said, “You have found grace from God.” Grace means a gift that God gives without the receiver earning it. What was the grace that Mary found from God? It was that she would have a miracle baby. I was talking to some pastors last week and one of them told us about a question that someone had recently asked him. If Mary had found favor with God, why was she punished with having to have a baby? That question speaks volumes about how we view children today versus how they viewed them in the past. But more importantly, it shows an incredible lack of understanding about what was happening. The greatest gift Mary ever received was Jesus. First of all, Jesus as her Savior, as the one who opened heaven for her. Then in a special and unique way, the gift that God gave her was that she got to be the mother of the Lord. She could never have earned or deserved that gift, but God gave it to her.

That child was truly hers. He was the product of a miracle, to be sure, but because she was his biological mother, he was fully human in every way that we are except that he had no sin. He had no human father – that was the miracle part. But he was conceived in her womb and he grew there like every other baby ever born. He was born and like all real human children, he needed to be fed and kept warm and loved. The Bible describes him growing in his body and in his mind and even in his faith. Jesus was just as human as we are. That’s what we mean when we say he was the child of Mary.

But he was more. The angel told Mary that God would give to him the throne of his father David and that he would rule over the house of Jacob forever. King David was Israel’s greatest king. He lived a thousand years before Jesus was born. Jesus was his physical heir. Sometimes, people ask a question here. Luke says that Joseph was a descendant of David. He doesn’t actually say that Mary was. How do we know that Mary was descended from King David? Right here, the angel says that he will inherit the throne of his father, David. Clearly, Jesus was physically descended from David. Joseph was his stepfather, so Mary had to be from David’s line.

That matters because God had promised King David that when the time was right, his descendant would come and rule over his kingdom forever. Hundreds of years later, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and described that king coming after the royal house had been cut down and turned into a stump. That certainly applied in Jesus’ day. Joseph, the son of David, was a carpenter, not a king. His son grew up poor and unnoticed. But he was the promised King of Israel. He was the Savior that God’s people waited 1500 years to see.

And he was truly as human as we are because God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. He sent Jesus to rescue us from all that we do to ourselves. Have you ever felt guilty? We all wrestle with that emotion, right? Sometimes it’s because we don’t call our mothers often enough. Sometimes it’s because we don’t pay enough attention to our spouses or our children or because work keeps us from some momentous event in their lives. Sometimes it’s because we lose our tempers and we say things we regret. But we all struggle with guilt sometimes. And guilt really means that we know that we’ve done wrong and we know we deserve to be punished. God’s punishment for our sins is hell. But Jesus came to set us free from guilt – not just from feeling guilty, but from actual guilt. He came to set us free from the punishment we deserve. He did that by living a perfect life. The one difference between him and us was that he never sinned. His heart and his mind and his life were perfect. God counts that as ours. Then Jesus died and suffered hell itself on the cross to pay for all of our sins. Then Jesus rose to lead us out of the grave and into eternal life. He had to be human to do all that. He had to be human to live and die in our place. He had to be human to rise and give us eternal life. Jesus was a real human being. He was our Savior.

II.

But that baby was much more than just a human baby. Who can rule forever but God? **Who is this child? He is the Son of God.** The angel said, “**He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.**” When we say, “He’s called this or he’s called that” we often mean that it really isn’t true or completely true. If we say that someone called a specific person a hero, we’re usually implying that there is some doubt, or it’s what they claim. But in the Bible, the point of this expression is just the opposite. In Hebrew culture a name tells you who someone really is. Several times in the Old Testament, God changed people’s names because the new name did a better job of describing who the person really was. So when God says that this baby will be called the Son of the Most High, he’s saying that’s who he really is.

That's the true miracle of Christmas. It's popular these days on Christmas specials and Christmas episodes of TV shows to have a "Christmas miracle." But usually it's something like getting presents you couldn't afford or finding a long lost love or a family putting aside its differences. Some of the "miracles" would go better with a Harry Potter story than with Christmas. The true miracle of Christmas is that God came down to this earth and made himself one of us. God joined himself to our existence. He didn't sit up on Mt. Olympus somewhere and wait for us to climb up to him. He didn't give us a bunch of rules to follow in order to make it to him. He didn't shrug his shoulders about us and move on to more important things. God the Son, true God in every way, entered our existence. He made himself man without ceasing to be God. So God was born in that stable and laid in that manger. God was wrapped in strips of cloth to keep out the cold of the Judean night. God was cared for and grew up and experienced all that life does to us here.

How did that happen? The angel says: **"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."** What do these words mean? I wouldn't dare to claim to understand them, except to say that the Holy Spirit came on Mary with the power of God and he did a miracle in her womb. He caused her to conceive while she was still a virgin. And at that very moment of conception, the Son of God entered her womb and took on that human nature and was born nine months later in Bethlehem.

Why did God do this greatest of all miracles? To set us free. It was not enough that one perfect human being lived. It was not enough that one perfect human being died and then rose. God wanted to save all the billions of human beings who will ever live. God wanted to save you. So he gave his us Son. In Christ, the Son of God lived a perfect life and died to pay for all our sins and then rose again. In Christ, God paid for all that you and I and every other person could ever be guilty of. He was the only one whose life and death and resurrection could count for us all.

That's who this child is. That's why we have manger scenes under our trees and on our Christmas cards. That's why we sing carols about that baby in the manger. The truth is, all the best carols say that. "This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds laud and angels sing," or "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." Or another verse: "Hail the incarnate Prince of Peace! Hail the Everlasting Lord!" This child is your God and your King. He came to bring you home to him. Amen.