

How can you believe this? Luke 1:26-38

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 favored 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 favor 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. For 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.

Today is the last week in Advent and we have for our meditations this section from the Gospel according to Luke. The section about the conception of Jesus. I thought that I could entitle this sermon 'How can you believe this?'

The angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth to tell that virgin Mary, virgin Mary [!] that she will conceive from the Holy Spirit, from the Holy Spirit [!] and that she will bear a son, the Son of the Most High.

So what do you think about it? What kind of story is this? Remember that we say it in our Creeds every Sunday, we just said it: "I believe that He ... was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human..." You just said it!

Today we will try to answer three questions. First, how could Luke know all of this? Second, how could this possibly happen? Third, what does it mean for us or what does it teach to us?

How could Luke know it, how could this happen, and what does it mean for us. How could Luke know it? Do you know who Luke was? Yes, he was the author of both the gospel according Luke and also the book of Acts.

That is from his pen that we know both the life of Jesus and also about a history of the early church. But who was this Luke? As much as we know from the Bible itself and also from the Church tradition, Luke was a physician, educated man.

Paul says in his letter to Colossians “beloved physician Luke”. Luke probably travelled with Paul on his second missionary journey as we can read it in Acts. He was also together with Paul when Paul was imprisoned. Luke’s care for Paul may have extended his life and given us few more of Paul’s letters.

So, how did Luke know about the conception of Jesus? He explains it in the beginning of his gospel account. That is, he closely examined testimonies of eyewitnesses and testimonies of those to whom the Gospel was entrusted.

What does it mean, to explore the testimonies of the eyewitnesses? We know for sure that Luke was together with the apostle Paul at least from year 49. He might have become a Christian already 10 to 15 years after Jesus resurrection, if not earlier.

So when he refers to eyewitnesses, they could be the apostles, or Jesus brothers and even Mary herself. When we see how close these events where is time, - Jesus resurrection and ministry of Luke were separated may be only by decade ...

... it helps us to appreciate the message of his gospel as a historical record. As Luke himself put it, he did it so “That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:4) That you may have certainty...

You, who receive Luke’s message. This is how Luke knew it. This was the whole purpose of Luke writing this commentary, to check the facts from eyewitnesses.

He was a doctor, we can say scientifically minded person, and he wanted to check everything carefully so that we can be certain about how everything happened.

Let’s get to our second question. How could this possibly happen? You know, angel Gabriel, virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. All the things we say in our Creeds. Let’s look at how Luke describes it.

We don’t know what the angel looked like. He just showed up and said: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But we know how Mary reacted to this greeting. She was greatly troubled ...

So the angel have to proceed with calming her down. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Stop being afraid, these are good news.

Girls used to marry early those days. We can imagine this teenager girl, not even in her twenties yet, being approached by the angel and what follows is not quite usual, quite ... scary.

“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.”

She was a girl. A young lady. What do we hear when we read these words? His name will be Jesus. In Hebrew it was Jeshua, which means God Yahweh saves or God Yahweh is salvation. Impressive name.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. In other words, He will be called the Son of God. The Son of God! And the Lord will give Him the throne of David.

We heard in our readings this section from 2. Samuel where the Lord promised that He will establish for the king David’s son the throne of his kingdom forever. Now this promised was about to be fulfilled through Mary.

And His kingdom will have no end... What incredible promises, how great words, - the Son of God, the eternal kingdom. Mind blowing. We may wonder about many things in relation to these mighty promises, when we read these words by Luke.

But Mary was simply a young lady. She didn’t worry about these great things. She was worried about something else. ‘How could this be, since I am a virgin?’ How could I conceive a son, if I do not have a husband yet?

You see, Mary was not worried about great things that the angel told, and that was hard to understand. She was worried about what she understood. How could this be? It is impossible.

She was betrothed to Joseph and knew well, how exactly children are conceived. That’s why she was so confused. Let’s leave aside these big words, and future promises, I don’t understand ... I can’t be pregnant.

“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 here is the sign for you, so that you can believe. “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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

The angel told her exactly as much as we can understand. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you. The same Spirit, who was hovering upon the waters before the Creator ordered His creation, the same Spirit will come upon you.

How sufficient was the angels explanation? In a sense he told what was going to happen and how Mary will conceive. But, on the other hand, what the angel said was as mysterious as what he said before.

What does it mean, the Holy Spirit will come upon you? Can we understand it? No. We can't. Could Mary understand it. Probably not much more than us. The Holy Spirit, God Himself will intervene into His creation and do something new.

How can you explain the work of the Holy Spirit? He is the Creator, we are creatures, His creature. Beloved, very dear, but creatures. Limited in our ability to comprehend what and how God does.

Then 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.

We can't explain more that the angel revealed, and that Mary later shared with others. This is as much as it given to us. But what is given is very clear. Jesus Christ was the Son of God, conceive by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

It's clear not because we can understand or explain it, it's clear for we know who was at work at Jesus conception.

Now our last question. What does this mean for us, or what can we learn from this event? Trust to God's word. Trust to what God promises. Trust to God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Trust that He is fully capable of doing what He has promised to you. To you. And in a sense, this is the hardest part. And this is what we can learn from this young lady Mary.

It is not easy to believe that there was the angel. But, let it be. It is not easy to believe what this angel said to Mary, what will happen, but let it be. If she herself testified about this, and if Jesus proved that He is exactly what the angel said, let it be, we'll take it.

We can measure evidence and go where highest probability leads us, to take this to be a true account of what happened. But so far it has nothing to do personally with you, right? But think what it meant for Mary personally to say these words:

"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." It meant that something will happen that will change her life forever. There will be no way back. And still she said almost as Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane – let your will happen. Let it be to me according to you word.

What do we say to the Lord, when He speaks to us? When He foretells us what is going to happen? Of course, our situation is different. To Mary God promised the Son. We, on the other hand, are made children of God through Mary's son.

When she said 'yes' the Saviour of human race was conceived. When we, or our parents said 'yes' we were adopted into God's family. This is who you are, a child of God.

And we can say as Mary said: 'I don't understand, how could this be?' That's true. I don't understand how could this be that through water and word in holy baptism I can become a child of God.

But I know that the same Spirit is at work. The same who formed and ordered this world. The same who came upon Mary. The same whom Jesus promised to give His church. To give abundantly.

God speaks to you through His messengers as He did to Mary. What God says, we can't always understand. But we know that we can trust that whatever He promises He will fulfil. He is the Creator. He is not bound by anything, but His promises.

As it is written: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num. 23:19).

He has said to you: "I take you to be my child. I forgive you all your sins. I come to you to bless you. Here I am, take and eat, this is my body, and this is my blood, which is shed for you.

I am with you till the end of this age. I will never leave you and will never forsake you. Now I go to prepare the place for you in my Father's house so that where I am you can also be."

I can't understand all of this. I guess you can't either. But we can be as certain as certain we could possibly be about anything - He is coming back to restore His creation, and you'll be with him in His Kingdom.

We know this for Jesus promised it and He Himself confirmed it saying: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Mat 24:35) May all these God's promises give you light and joy in this Christmas time.

Amen.