

## **Week of December 21<sup>st</sup> – Luke 1:26-38**

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

### ***Devotional Readings***

Sunday	2 Samuel 7
Monday	Psalms 89
Tuesday	Romans 16
Wednesday	Luke 1
Thursday	Exodus 40
Friday	Romans 1
Saturday	Matthew 1:18-25

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### ***Article: The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus - Luke 1:26-38***

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by N.T. Wright from *Luke for everyone* (England: London : SPCK, 2001.), 08-12.

Ask a newspaper editor what sort of stories will sell the most copies, and three categories come swiftly to mind: sex, royalty and religion. If they can be combined, so much the better. 'POP STAR'S LOVE CHILD' is good; 'PRINCESS HAS SECRET AFFAIR' is better; 'KING'S SECRET NIGHT WITH NUN' is better still. So when people read the story of Gabriel visiting Mary, with the child to be born being the future Lord of the 'World, their minds easily jump in the way the newspapers have conditioned them to do. People have read into the story all sorts of things that aren't there, and have failed to notice some of the really important things that are.

Let's begin with the obvious point. The story makes it clear that Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb before she had had any sexual relations. Many people today find this impossible to believe, but they often think that this difficulty has only arisen in modern times, because of all we now know about the precise mechanics of conception and birth. Not so. The ancient world didn't know about X chromosomes and Y chromosomes, but they knew as well as we do that babies were the result of sexual intercourse, and that people who claimed to be pregnant by other means might well be covering up a moral and social offense. Yet Mary's story is told by both Luke and Matthew, in versions so different that they can hardly be dependent on one another; in other words, the story seems to have been widely known in the very early church, rather than being a fantasy invented several generations after the fact. Why would these two writers, and devout Jewish Christian congregations that passed on such stories, have done so, giving hostages to fortune in this way, unless they had good reason to suppose they were true?

It's important to stress that the story says nothing about Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus' birth. Nor does it say anything about the goodness or badness of sexual identity or sexual relations. Whatever Luke (and Matthew) are trying to say with this story, they aren't saying that virginity is a morally better state than marriage. They are not denigrating sex, women, conception or birth. They are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in the ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given special grace to be the mother of God's incarnate self.

Luke has no thought that this might make Jesus somehow less than fully human. Scientists will say that virgin birth is in theory possible (it sometimes happens in small animals, e.g. lizards), and that a child thus produced would be a complete human being. The problem is that, always supposing such a thing was possible, the child would naturally be female. The truly remarkable thing from the scientific point of view is that Jesus was male.

The angel gives what looks like a double explanation for the whole event. The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary, enabling her (as the Spirit always does) to do and be more than she could by herself. But at the same time ‘the power of the Most High’ will overshadow her. This is something different: God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power.

All this sounds extremely peculiar, but we should remember that in the Bible, and in Jewish and Christian thought at their best, the true God is the one in whose image humans were made in the first place. We aren’t talking about a pagan god intervening roughly and inappropriately in the affairs of mortals, but about the one who, as St Augustine said, made us for himself. When he takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love, love which will care for us and take us up into his saving purposes. Mary is, to that extent, the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God’s power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.

Of course, no one is likely to be convinced of Luke’s story who isn’t already in some sense open to the possibility that Jesus, though certainly a fully human being, was also the one in whom Israel’s God had made his personal appearance on the stage of history. And it’s important to say that neither Luke nor Matthew (the two writers who speak about Jesus’ conception directly) suggest that this is the most important thing about Jesus. In all of Paul’s writings, he never mentions that there had been anything unusual about Jesus’ conception or birth. Jesus’ death and resurrection remain, for him, far more significant. But to those who have come to some kind of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, whose minds are thus opened to God being uniquely present in him, there is a sense of appropriateness, hard to define, easy to recognize, about the story Luke and Matthew tell. It isn’t what we would have expected, but it somehow rings true.

Far more important for the whole story, though, is the political or royal meaning Luke gives to the whole event. The child to be born will be the Messiah, the king of the house of David. God had promised David a descendant who would reign for ever — not over Israel only, but also the whole world. And this coming king would be, in some sense, ‘God’s son’ (2 Samuel 7.14; Psalm 2.7; Psalm 89.27). As with a good deal of New Testament language about Jesus, this is both a huge theological claim (Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and now find it hard to grasp and believe) and a huge political claim (Jesus is the true ruler of the world in a way which leaves Caesar, and the powers of the world today, a long way behind).

Put all this together — the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all human empires — and we can see why the story is so explosive. Perhaps that’s one reason why it’s so controversial. Perhaps some of the fuss and bother about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don’t want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of absolute allegiance? Whatever answer we give to that, we shouldn’t miss the contrast between muddled, puzzled Zechariah in the previous story and the obedient humility of Mary in this one. She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, not proof. Rather, faced with the chance to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of what this will involve, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God’s unexpected vocation: ‘Here I am, the Lord’s servant-girl; let it be as you have said.’

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**About the author:** N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright’s *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published

works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

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### **Small Group Questions**

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#### **Accountability**

Apostolic Mission - Are you learning to be intentional about sharing Jesus with neighbors? Are you praying for a 3:1:M friend? How are they doing? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

#### **Open / Scripture**

1. Have you ever been looked at with suspicion or looked down at from others because you are a Christian? If so, how did that experience make you feel? How did you respond to that experience both privately and publically? Have those experiences challenged or encouraged your obedience and faithfulness to Christ? If so, how?

#### **Observation**

1. What are the details of the scene that Luke describes starting in Luke 1:26? (When, where, who, etc)
2. How does the angel address Mary?(Lk 1:28)
3. What is Mary's initial internal reaction?(Lk 1:29) From the greeting, why might she have this strong reaction?
4. What does the angel tell Mary as to what will happen to her?(Lk 1:30) What does he reveal about this son that she will have? With Mary being a powerless, poor, Jewish, peasant girl, how might she feel about being told she would be the mother of the promised King of Israel / Messiah? Contrast David's struggle with King Saul (1 Samuel 16-24) with the potential threat that her son would be to the governing powers?
5. What is Mary's question for the angel Gabriel? (Lk. 1:34) Why would she assume that she was conceiving this child now, rather than after their wedding? How might she be perceived by her community, husband, and family by a premarital pregnancy? What might be some of the ramifications be for her culturally by receiving this pregnancy?
6. What is the angel's response to Mary's question? (Lk. 1:35) When does the angel indicate when she will conceive? How does the angel describe how this will happen?
7. It has been suggested that the word "overshadow" in the phrase "the power of the Most High will overshadow you", used by the angel, could be an allusion to the spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:1. It is also thought in relation to the presence of God in form of a cloud by day that lead the people through the wilderness and which remained in the Holies of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was located. How might those Old Testament concepts behind that phrase have played a role in Mary's understanding of what God was going to do?
8. How does the angel offer another proof of the work of God in Mary's relative's life? (Lk. 1:36-37) How is that miracle different from the one that the angel is announcing to Mary?
9. What is Mary's response? (Lk. 1:38) What does the angel do after her response?

#### **Apply**

1. Not only does Mary risk cultural, marital, and financial ruin from becoming pregnant out of wedlock, but she also faced the a threat from those in power who would be threatened by her future son, who will be the promised King and Messiah. One might say that she completed a high jump that few might even attempt. God must have prepared her for that moment. How might God be using the struggles, tensions, and frustrations in your life?
2. The angel came shortly before the fulfillment of a major life goal of being married as a virgin. What would it had taken for her to lay down her dreams and hopes for this out of the blue message from God? Attempt to place yourself within her shoes. Could you have the trusted God in possibly laying down your hopes, dreams, and life? What if it meant the risk of losing your child, spouse, job, or lifestyle?
3. We are told in the 4 gospels of the provision and oversight God ensured for Mary's life despite the "risks" that she took. What does this illustrate about trusting God rather than cultural hopes and expectations?
4. This week, mediate on 1 Samuel 17 in relation to David's faith. Take time to reflect on the challenges that God has allowed to develop in your life in light of David's experience as a shepherd. How might God be using your failures, frustrations, successes, and tensions to shape and mold you? Would seeing them in that light change your perception of their place and value in your life?