

## **Let it be to me according to your promise**

Luke 1:28-36

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

The first Sunday of Advent the text was Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." The second Sunday the text was about: Wake up. Be prepared. But none of us did as we should have. We can't, we don't, but thank God, God does it. Last Sunday we looked at what comes out of that: Since God does it, does it make any difference what we do, or is everybody saved? The point is it is what God does that is decisive and that decides things.

Therefore, it is extremely logical that today we come to Mary. Sometimes it is forgotten among us, but in 431 A.D., in Ephesus, the universal church declared and confessed that Mary is the God-bearer. She is the one. She is unique among all human beings. She is the one chosen by God to bear his son. We do not want in any way to take away from that.

At the same we are aware that a lot of nonsense has been made out of that. An angel has come to Mary and told her she is going to have a baby. Mary was maybe 14 or 15 years old, and she had no education and was brought up in a good Jewish family, and she said to the angel: "How can this be since I don't have a husband?" (Luke 1:34). As we look at this text it is a very good way of pointing out how God works.

First of all, it is important to look at what is called the Virgin Birth. It's in the creeds, and we confess it, and it sometimes becomes a huge problem. What is this about? Is it possible scientifically? There's a big Greek word "parthenogenesis," which means can a female conceive without a male? Biologists use the example of the aphid, a species for whom that is possible, and there's this big discussion of that possibility. In recent times we have genetic engineering, and other such possibilities.

Then in the literature on the virgin birth one of the big things is the whole matter of the accounts of the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman ancient times and how they came down from Mount Olympus and mixed themselves among human beings and had children by one means or another. These kinds of stories are associated with great leaders.

This leads people to mistakenly think the virgin birth is what tells people that he is God. But, of course, if that were the case, he would at best be half-God, a demi-God. The Nicene Creed points he is fully human and fully God. So that's not what it is about. Of course, he wouldn't be sinless either because Mary was sinful, so again that doesn't do it. What then is this virgin birth about?

We could ask: What was the greatest miracle of all time? Answer: The one who is holy took care of sin. That's what it is about. Incidentally and far behind is: Therefore, he made life out of death. Therefore, he created something out of nothing (1 Cor 1:28). Therefore, he took some slaves who were unknown in Egypt and made them a great nation. Incidentally he was born of a virgin. That is just sort of a blink of the eye.

What it means for you and me particularly is a new start. He made a new start. That is spelled out in the sequence of these four Sundays in Advent. He gives us a new kind of freedom.

What is the freedom we are given? We are now for sure free of sin and death. It's not a freedom that we produce. It's the freedom talked about in that great Reformation text, John 8:36: "If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed." Then we can be spiritually free because we are free from worrying about our own future.

To come back to Mary, imagine an angel comes to this young woman and says: "You're going to have a baby." She knew about Sarah, the wife of Abraham who had a baby when she was old, maybe even 90. She knew about Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who had a baby when she was quite old. She knew also about her cousin, Elizabeth, who is having a baby even though she is also old. God can do all kinds of things. That's not the problem. The problem is she is not married. She knew it would be a scandal. In fact, in the first chapter of Matthew Joseph, being a good man, said quietly: "I will take her." Otherwise she would have been in big trouble.

We mistakenly think that the angel and Mary had a nice conversation, even a kind of simple negotiation: He says: "Look, Mary, this is going to happen to you." And she says: "O.K. I agree." Not at all! First of all, she was not in any way able to understand what was happening, except she knew that with God nothing is impossible. That didn't mean that God himself would come as a human being. That was impossible for the Jewish mind to think. Even more than that, it was impossible to think that God would die on the cross. In the third chapter of Mark there's a famous passage about Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters coming and trying to get Jesus away

from the authorities because the authorities were saying he was crazy, that he should be put away somewhere (Mark 3:20-21).

And then Simeon says to Mary that a sword would pierce her heart; she will one day watch her son die on the cross (Luke 2:35). It wasn't that she understood what was happening. It also wasn't that when the angel came to her on the way to Bethlehem, that she agreed. In Luke 1:38 Mary says: Let it be that way. ("Let it be to me according to your word.") People say she consented, but as Luther points out: That is not why she is the great example of what it means to believe.

We may think that faith is a kind of fatalism. "Believing" just means being fatalistic about what happens. It's not what it says. It says: "Let it be to me according to your word." That's what it is about; it's God's promise. As we remind ourselves, his promise is not like ours; his promises are sure and do not fail.

It's not that God chose Mary and then she chose him, agreed to it. It's he chose her, and that was it. And the same is true for you and me. He has made you his own in Baptism and his promise does not fail. He has chosen you. And that's what we celebrate this Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen