**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**GOD’S GRACE FOR A TEENAGE GIRL**

**Luke 1:26-56**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your bibles to Luke 1. Over the last two Sundays we have been in our new series called “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt.” Luke tells us in the prologue to this book that his intention is to give people certainty in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All people, non-Christians and Christians, will experience doubt regarding Jesus. The only question is how the doubt resolves itself. As Darrell Bock puts it, “Doubt hangs in a dangerous canyon between faith and unbelief.” God, through the Gospel of Luke, intends to help us journey out of the dangerous canyon of doubt and into belief.

Last Sunday, we saw that the Gospel of Luke begins with the story of a doubting priest named Zechariah. He, along with his wife Elizabeth, were a pious couple. They obeyed God’s commands and served him faithfully. And yet, despite their piety, God never gave them a gift of a child. They were never able to conceive. They had prayed for a child in their younger years, but as time went by and no child came, they gave up hope. And so, when an angel appeared to Zechariah in the Temple and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a child who would be a great prophet, Zechariah doubted. By doubting the angel, he doubted God, which led to God’s discipline. God disciplined him for his unbelief by making him mute, not out of anger, but out of love. God loved Zechariah so much that he would not leave him with his doubts, and God used that discipline to do just that.

Today, Luke shifts the scene from the majesty of the Temple in Jerusalem to a little country town called Nazareth, where he turns our attention away from the doubting priest to a teenage girl named Mary.

Our culture has such low expectations of teenagers. It’s typical to think of teenagers as immature and reckless, moody and dramatic, overly-emotional, overly-everything. Teenagers do things that no one can explain. I remember when I was fifteen, I was on an orchestra tour through Western Canada without my parents. One night when we were in our hotel, my brother and a couple friends and I decided it would be a good idea to create spit balls out of tissue paper and lob them over our balcony to the clueless pedestrians down below. Why? I cannot give you an answer. We were irrational, immature, and convinced that we could do anything. I would never point anyone to a teenage version of myself as an example to follow.

But that’s exactly what Luke does with Mary. He points to her as an example to follow. Luke writes this story about Mary in order to intentionally contrast it with the story about Zechariah. There are parallels all over the place. Both are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are afraid and told not to fear. Both receive news of an unexpected baby. Both are told what their child’s name will be. Both ask one question. Both receive a sign. In writing his account this way, Luke wants us to see two main things: the greatness of the second baby over the first, and the faith of the teenage girl over the doubts of the elderly priest.

I have titled this message **God’s Grace for a Teenage Girl**. My intention today is to show that **The Greatness of Jesus is Displayed through the Faith of his People**.

We will have three points today, with each point meant to contrast an element of Zechariah’s story with Mary’s.

1. Prophet vs. King
2. Doubt vs. Faith
3. Silence vs. Song

(1) **PROPHET VS. KING**

Our text begins in verse 26, where Luke writes, “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth.” In typical fashion, Luke is situating the following events in terms of time and place. The scene is Nazareth, a town so insignificant that he needs to say it is in the region of Galilee so that people have a general sense of where it can be found. The time is the “sixth month”, which in the context can only refer to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. By describing the time of these events in relation to Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Luke is signaling to us that the story that is about to come is meant to be interpreted in light of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story.

Luke goes on in verse 27 to say that the angel Gabriel was sent to “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.” A betrothal was a legally binding arrangement that would result in marriage about a year later. Girls could be betrothed as early as 12, but would typically be betrothed by the age of 15. This verse gives us a sense of how young Mary was when the angel Gabriel visited her. What were you doing when you were 15? I was waiting with eager expectation to get my G1. Mary was waiting with eager expectation to hear from an angel.

This is what the angel says in verse 28: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” What a remarkable thing to say. Mary is favoured by God, which means that she has received God’s grace, not because she has done anything to deserve it, but simply because God chose her. Remember that, in 1:6, Luke goes out of his way to describe both Zechariah and Elizabeth as

“…righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth were exceptional in their piety, in their obedience, and in their reverence for the Lord. In contrast, Luke writes nothing about Mary’s piety or obedience. It doesn’t appear that there was anything special about her. She did not receive grace because she was special. She was special because she received grace.

That is how the Lord works. He gives his grace as a gift, not as a reward. Some of you may feel that God is not with you. You feel like he’s against you. You feel like God’s anger is on you, not his grace, whether it’s because you’re too sinful, or you’re not spiritual enough, or you haven’t done your devotions every day. As a result, you constantly struggle with believing that God loves you and that he has forgiven you. If this describes you, you need to know that, if you trust in Christ, your failures cannot keep God’s grace from you, because it is his gift to all those who put their faith in Christ, not his reward.

Others may feel like God *has* to be with you. You feel as though you deserve his grace because you’ve done all the right things. As a result, you believe that you’re entitled to God’s favour, and we all know what happens when we don’t get what we believe we deserve. We become bitter. Are you bitter towards God? If so, you need to know that you do not deserve his grace. No one deserves it. It is a free gift, not a reward, and it must be so because God’s grace is too precious, and our sin too great, to ever merit his favour.

This is the power of grace: it comforts those who struggle with believing that God’s favour is on them, and it humbles those who believe that God’s favour is their right.

Mary didn’t quite understand what Gabriel meant when he said she was favoured by God, and so Gabriel proceeds to explain in verse 30: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” The grace of God rested on Mary not because she had done anything remarkable, but because she was chosen to do something remarkable for the Lord: she will bear a son, whom she will name Jesus.

Gabriel then goes on to tell her who her son will be: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”

Remember what the angel Gabriel told Zechariah about John in verse 15:

“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”

John was to be “great before the Lord”. And he was great. He was the prophet who was prophsed to come by Malachi, the one whom Jesus said was the greatest man who ever lived. But though he was great, his greatness came with qualification. He would be “great *before the Lord*.” Jesus’ greatness came without qualification. He would simply be great.

The prophet Micah prophesied about the “great one”, Jesus Christ, in Micah 4:4:

“And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.”

The one who was “great before the Lord” came to ready the people, but the one who was “great” came to rule the people. But how would he rule his people? Like a shepherd over his flock. Jesus himself would identify himself as the fulfillment of the Micah prophesy in John 10:14-15:

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:14-15)

Jesus Christ was great without qualification, because he would rule over his people as the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. Like sheep threatened by a deadly predator, we were threatened by the curse of sin, and like a good shepherd, Jesus saved us from our sin by taking our curse upon himself and dying on a cross. This is why we worship Jesus, not John. John was, and still is, “great before the Lord”, but Jesus is great before all.

Our text goes on to reveal that Jesus was not just the prophesied shepherd. He was also the prophesied king. Gabriel continues in verses 32-33: “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.” One thousand years earlier, God promised to King David that one of his descendants would rule forever in what has become known as “the Davidic Covenant”. This is what God promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13, 16:

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son…And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”

John was the prophesied prophet, the greatest prophet to ever live. But Jesus was the prophesied “shepherd king”, who would rule over his people with strength and gentleness forever.

(2) **DOUBT VS. FAITH**

Now Luke turns our attention away from Jesus and towards the young woman who would carry him in her womb and raise him as her child. This leads to our second point: doubt vs. faith.

In response to the angel Gabriel’s astounding revelation, Mary asks in verse 34, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” These are her first words recorded in Luke, and they come in the form of a question. Zechariah’s first words in Luke were also in the form of a question. This is what he asked in verse 18: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” Mary’s response showed faith, and Zechariah’s response showed doubt.

When Zechariah asked, “How will this be?” he was asking for a sign. He needed something else to prove to him that the news about his son’s birth would actually take place. By asking for a sign, Zechariah doubted God’s promise, and in doing so, he doubted God.

Like Zechariah, have you ever asked for a sign to confirm the truth of God’s promise? There are many promises of God that we may doubt, but perhaps the promise most doubted is the greatest promise of all: the promise that God will forgive your sin if you turn from your sin and trust in Christ. You’ve heard that promise, but you doubt. There’s many reasons why you may doubt. You doubt because you think you’re too sinful, or you doubt because you think you’re good enough that you don’t need to be forgiven, or you doubt because you don’t know if God exists, or you doubt because you don’t know if Jesus is who he claims to be. And as you doubt, you say to yourself, and perhaps even to God, “I will believe *if* God gives me a sign.” That sign could be any number of things: the salvation of a dearly loved family member, a fulfilling romantic relationship, the job you’ve always wanted, or even something supernatural, like an angelic appearance or a miracle.

We saw last Sunday that this kind of doubting leads to God’s discipline. God disciplines Zechariah by making him temporarily mute. But why, you may wonder? What’s wrong with asking for a sign? How can God expect us to believe things we’ve never seen with our own eyes? How can God expect us to trust promises made thousands of years ago? Isn’t it reasonable to ask for a sign?

The reason why asking for a sign is wrong is because it says that your trust isn’t ultimately in God, but in the sign that you’re asking for. God wants us to trust *him*. He wants us to trust that what he says, he will do. When we ask for a sign, we’re saying that God’s words are not enough, and when we say that God’s words are not enough, we’re saying that God is not enough.

Think about how you’d feel if you promised a friend that you would give him a gift. You expect him to trust that you will do what you say, because you expect him to trust *you*. But say your friend doubts your promise. Rather than trust you, he says “How will you guarantee to me that you will give me a gift?” Or he says, “I’ll believe you when I see the gift in my hands.” If your friend did that, he wouldn’t be trusting you. Your word would not be enough. Instead, he’d be trusting the sign used to prove that your word was true.

That’s what we do to God when we demand a sign. Whatever the sign we ask for may be, we’re using that sign to measure and assess God’s faithfulness. The sign becomes the thing by which we measure the truthfulness of God. It becomes our ultimate authority. But God will not be measured, and he will not be assessed. God is God, he is the only true ultimate authority, and he requires that we take him at his word.

That doesn’t mean that there’s no room for questions. Asking questions and having faith are not incompatible. Mary shows us how this works in verse 34: “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Like Zechariah, Mary doesn’t know how the angel’s words will come true, because what he has said seems impossible. But unlike Zechariah, Mary doesn’t ask for a sign. She simply asks how it would be that the Lord would fulfill his word. She knew that God would keep his word without needing a sign, because she trusted God and not a sign. Zechariah’s question expressed uncertainty about whether God would keep his word. Mary’s question expressed uncertainty about *how* God would keep his word.

This is what true faith looks like. It’s believing God’s promises even when you don’t know exactly *how* he will keep them. Like doubt, faith can involve uncertainty. But unlike doubt, faith is never uncertain about the faithfulness of God.

This ought to be wonderfully freeing to those who experience uncertainty, but have always believed that uncertainty was incompatible with faith. You feel like having questions and asking them means that your faith is weak. That’s not the case at all. Our text today shows us that we can ask questions, we can inquire, and we can have uncertainty about how the Lord will fulfill his plans, all while having faith in God’s promises and in the God who makes those promises.

And here’s the amazing thing: when we trust that God will do what he says, God does two things. First, when we don’t know how God will do what he says, God helps us understand. Look at verse 35: “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.’” Mary had asked how she would conceive, since she was a virgin. Gabriel doesn’t say, “Just believe” or “These things are too mysterious for you to understand. Stop asking questions.” Gabriel actually tries to help her understand. He reveals to her that the power of God, delivered through the Holy Spirit, would bring about this miraculous conception. There’s no question that there is still incredible mystery here. But when we inquire into the mysteries of God and God answers our inquiries, we shouldn’t be surprised that we cannot understand all that he reveals.

The second thing God does is even more astounding: he gives Mary a sign to strengthen her faith. Look at verse 36: “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.” Zechariah demanded a sign in order to believe. Mary believed without a sign and received one anyways in order to strengthen her belief. The sign God gave her was Elizabeth’s conception. If Elizabeth conceived in impossible circumstances, then Mary can believe that she also will conceive in impossible circumstances. Mary’s response, then, is one of faithful surrender in verse 38: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Do you desire a sign from God? If so, our text today urges you to be like Mary. Don’t desire a sign like Zechariah, who would only believe if he received the sign. Be like this teenage girl from a rural town in the middle of nowhere, who believed even though she didn’t understand. Believe, and God will strengthen your belief. God can do that in any number of ways, through answered prayer, through provision in a time of need, through a prophetic word, through the timely word of a trusted friend. It could be anything. Whatever it may be, the Lord will use it to strengthen your faith.

But if you find yourself doubting like Zechariah, you are not without hope, for the Lord gave him a sign as well to strengthen his faith. It may hurt, it may be painful, but the Lord only gives us that pain in order to lead us out of the dangerous canyon of doubt and into the peace and joy of faith.

(3) **SILENCE VS. SONG**

This leads to our last point: silence vs. song.

Our story continues in verse 39, where we see Mary travelling in haste to Elizabeth’s home to confirm Gabriel’s sign. And when she gets there, she finds not only that Elizabeth was pregnant and the angel’s sign confirmed, but that both Elizabeth and her baby have some additional confirmation for her. This begins with John leaping inside Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice. You may recall Gabriel promising to Zechariah in verse 15 that John would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” Even before his birth, John, through the Holy Spirit, was pointing people to the Messiah.

Then Elizabeth herself is filled with the Spirit, and she proclaims that Mary is carrying none other than the Lord himself., and declares this blessing in verse 45: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” The Greek actually doesn’t say “Blessed is *she* who believes”, but rather “Blessed is *the one* who believes.” Elizabeth isn’t just saying that Mary is blessed because she believed. She is saying that all who believe *like* *Mary* will be blessed by God. In this way, Luke leaves no doubt that we are to imitate Mary in the way she trusted God.

Now we come to our last contrast between Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah, as a result of his doubt, was left in a state of silence. He was unable to speak for nine months. But he wasn’t just made mute. He was also made deaf. We see that later on in Chapter 1 in verse 62 after John’s birth, when his neighbours and relatives had to make “signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.” Obviously, if Zechariah could hear, they could just speak to him, but they couldn’t speak to him because he had been made deaf.

This is a stark picture of the darkness of doubt. I can only imagine what it’s like to be deaf and unable to speak. If you’re deaf, you can’t hear laughter. You can’t listen to music. You can’t find comfort in the familiar voices of your loved ones. The world must seem at times to be a very lonely place. There may still be joys in life for the deaf, but they can never experience the full range of life’s beautiful moments and experiences.

That’s what it’s like to live in doubt. You may still find enjoyment in various aspects of life, but you will never experience the fullness of life. You will never experience more than a piece of reality, because God is reality, and he is known, enjoyed, and treasured through faith.

Zechariah’s doubt may have left him in silence, but Mary’s faith led her to sing. She was not made mute. She was not made deaf. She was filled with a new song, her mouth full of praise to the God who showed her favour. This song she composes to the Lord in verses 46-55 is rich with imagery, complexity, and theology and gives us a window into the thoughts of a godly woman whose faith overflowed into joy.

The first two lines express Mary’s joy. She sings that her joy came from the deepest parts of her being, and this joy was directed to the one who was not only her Lord, but her Saviour. That is because joy is the fruit of faith. When we live by faith, we live in joy. That doesn’t mean we always experience joy. Our text says nothing about Mary’s joy until now. She didn’t rejoice at the angel’s appearance. She didn’t rejoice at the angel’s announcement. She didn’t rejoice at the angel’s sign. She didn’t rejoice until the Lord strengthened her faith with the confirmation of Elizabeth’s pregnancy and prophetic announcement. As Ecclesiastes 3:4 puts it, there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

Mary then goes on to sing about the reasons for her joy in verses 48-49. She sees herself as God’s servant, as one who is of a “humble estate”. She knows she doesn’t deserve anything, and she knows that God deserves everything. And yet, God has looked upon her with favour, assigning a task so great to her that all generations will call her blessed. “He who is mighty” has overshadowed her with his power through the Holy Spirit, causing this young woman, a virgin, to conceive. She worships God for holiness, shown to her through his abundant grace and mercy.

Mary then rejoices that these truths are not just true for her, but true for anyone who fears God in verse 50. The word “mercy” in verse 50 is the same word used to describe God’s faithfulness, loyalty, and pursuit of his covenant people. It is his steadfast love, his *hesed* love. That is the love that God has shown to Mary, and that is the love that God will show to generations and generations of any who live in the same reverential obedience to God.

But there is warning here as well in verses 51-53. God is not only mighty to lift up the humble. He is also mighty to tear down the proud. Those who are proud in their hearts, independent in their living, and satisfied with the things of this world will be scattered, brought down, and sent away empty. Such people do not fear God. Instead, they fear damage to their reputations. They fear the compromise of their independence. They fear the loss of their worldly wealth. God’s steadfast love and mercy are for those who fear him, not those who are proud.

Mary ends her song in verses 54-55, where she expresses her faith that the child God promised to her would be used by God to keep his promise to Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would make him a “great nation”, blessing those who bless him, cursing those who curse him, and making his offspring more numerous than the stars in the sky. Mary believed that it would be through her child, the promised Messiah, that the promises made to her forefathers would be fulfilled.

Mary rejoiced in song, because she believed the things that God revealed to her. But though God revealed much to Mary, he did not reveal all. She knew that she carried one who would be called “the Son of the Most High”, but she didn’t know she carried the only-begotten Son who was, and is, and always will be God himself. She knew that her baby would bring about the redemption of Israel, but she didn’t know that this redemption would spread to all the nations of the world. And she knew that her baby would save God’s people from captivity, but she didn’t know he would save them from captivity to their sin by taking their sins upon himself and dying on a cross on their behalf. She did not know the greater things that God would do through Jesus, and yet she rejoiced. We know the greater things. How much more should we rejoice?

**CONCLUSION**

It’s an amazing thing that God chose a teenage girl for the incomparable task of bringing the Son of God into the world. It’s also amazing that this same teenage girl would be an example of faith to countless generations of Christians, including ours. That doesn’t mean she was perfect. I’m sure in some ways she was immature, and I’m sure that she lived with the same struggles with sin that we do. But God didn’t choose to record those parts of her life. Instead, he chose to have her remembered for her faith in his promises.

Such is the gracious mercy of God, that because of Christ’s death on our behalf, he remembers our sins no more. Doubt is no exception. You may struggle with trusting God, you may wrestle with believing his promises, but your doubts will never change his promise that if you turn away from your sin and put your trust in Christ, he will wash your sins away and make you white as snow.

May the Lord in his mercy help all of us to respond to his promises with joy, so that we may sing with Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour… for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”