

Advent 4B, 2008

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Title: Unbelievably News

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We've become accustomed to hearing bad news. We're used to it, and we've grown to accept it and even expect it. The economy is down, again. There just aren't any jobs available. There's no end in sight for the war. Another public servant has betrayed our trust. The cancer is back. There's just nothing we can do. I don't love you any more. Hope is lost, and we are used to being disappointed.

Chances are, bad news has touched you some time in the past year. Whether it's your job and finances, whether it's a relationship, whether it's your health or the health of someone you love, you've probably had to deal with bad news.

And this is nothing new. We like to think that in years past times were better and there were fewer problems. We remember the good old days when everything was great. But this side of Eden, the news has been overwhelmingly bad.

Things have been so bad, that we expect the news to be bad. Things have been so bad, that we find good news hard to believe.

When we hear good news, we are tempted to doubt whether it really is true. There must be a catch. There must be a downside. Things may be looking up now, but they'll have to come back down eventually. There must be an ugly side to the story that we haven't heard yet. We've become so accustomed to bad news that we find good news hard to believe.

This was the case in Jesus' day as well. The people had become so used to war and occupation, high taxes, death and disease, that they found good news hard to believe.

So when Luke tells his good news, he's careful to document exactly when and where everything happened. He's not just making up stories. He's not trying to scam anyone. He tells you precisely when and where things happen so that you know that it actually took place, that it's not too good to be true.

Think about the Christmas story that you will hear once more on Wednesday night. How does it begin? With Caesar, Cyrenius and the census. This gives you the time. And then the place: Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth unto Judea, unto Bethlehem, the city of David. There's the setting- time and place, it happened. Luke is writing to give you certainty that these things actually happened. He's writing to people who remember the census and knew Caesar and Cyrenius. And they might have passed through Galilee that time they had business up north, or stopped through Bethlehem when they were on their way to Jerusalem.

And Luke does the same with today's gospel. Time. Place. It happened.

It begins with the time. The sixth month, that is, the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. As you remember, Luke begins his gospel with Zachariah in the temple and the announcement that he would be the father of John the Baptist.

The two stories- John and Jesus fit together. John comes first, to prepare the way, and so he gets a six month head start on Jesus.

When Zachariah heard the angel tell him that his prayers were answered and that he would be a father, the news was too good to be true. He didn't believe it. He questioned Gabriel, and as a result his mouth was shut for the next six months. He was so used to hearing the bad news and the disappointment of not having a child, that when the good news came, he couldn't believe it.

But back to Mary. Mary gets a load of good news. Every word that Gabriel spoke to her was good news.

What made the news good? What makes this good news is that the Lord does everything. From beginning to end. The Lord does it all.

Gabriel begins by telling Mary that she is highly favored. Those of you who grew up on King James remember, "Hail Mary, full of grace."

The Lord's choice of Mary was a gracious one. It all happens by His grace. Mary did not earn the right to be the mother of God. She did not win a contest or a pageant. The Lord chose her by grace.

Then Gabriel adds, "The Lord is with you." Emmanuel. God with us. God chooses to be with Mary. All the way out here in the back country of Galilee. The Lord has chosen to come here to be with her. Mary knew that the Lord was in Jerusalem at the temple. But here, in her humble home, with her?

This news is too good to be true. It's unbelievable. The Lord has filled her with His grace. The Lord was with her now.

Mary is surprised. Notice what she's surprised about. She's not surprised that an angel is standing in her kitchen. She's surprised by the greeting, the words that the angel has spoken to her- that she has been filled with the Lord's grace and that He is with her.

No one has ever spoken to her like that before. No one has ever loved in such a way. She's taken aback, confused, confounded by this good news.

But that's not all. There's more good news. Once again the angel assures her that she has found grace with God and then tells her that she is going to be a mother.

For Mary to have a normal child as a virgin would be a miracle in itself. But her son will not be an ordinary child. He will be the Son of God. He will be a king like David. He will rule over all of Israel.

All parents have high hopes for their children. But Mary is told by the angel that she will have a Son who will be the promised Messiah, the one that she and her people had been waiting for.

Again, the news is unbelievable. “Are you sure you’ve got the right house? Are you sure that you know who you’re talking to? I’m just a girl. I’m not even married yet. I don’t have any experience raising kids. Did I hear you right that I’m going to be the mother of God?” “Yes,” says the angel. The good news is that the Lord does everything. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Don’t worry. The Lord’s had this planned for a long time. He knows what he’s doing. Just look at what he’s doing with your cousins Zach and Liz.

Then comes the greatest miracle of all. Mary believes and says “Amen.” But listen to Mary’s words. It’s all about the Lord. It’s not about her. “The Lord is my master. He’s the one in charge. He’s running the show. I’m just a servant. May all His words come to be.”

Mary finally believes the Good News, the unbelievable news that, as a virgin, she is going to bear the Son of God, but even her faith not something she’s responsible for. The Lord does everything.

You’ve come here today to hear Good News. Out there, nearly all the news is bad. The news is full of selfishness, violence, sickness and death.

In here there is good news. It’s news so good, so wonderful, that it’s hard to believe at times. We often wonder with Mary, “How can this be?” How can it be, that a few splashes of water and a few words make me a new person? How can it be, that the Lord still loves me, still forgives me after all these years? How can it be, that bread and wine can bear the body and blood of God, and that I’m invited here to receive them? How can it be that the Lord can raise the dead, recreate this world, and make it perfect just for me?

It sounds too good to be true. But it is true, and it is good, because the Lord is the one who does it all.

His word, spoken by His apostle Gabriel entered Mary and changed her. The Lord was with her, the Lord dwelt inside of her, and the Lord created faith in her to believe all these things.

The Lord’s word, spoken by His apostolic ministers, has entered you and changed you. The Lord is with you, the Lord dwells inside of you, and the Lord creates faith in you to believe all these things.

The Good News is unbelievable, but the Lord creates faith in you to believe it. And that Good News is what gets you through all the Bad news, because you know that in the midst of everything the Lord still loves you and he’s got a better place ready for you.

Things would be difficult for Mary in the nine months to come. She would have to deal with neighbors who pointed and stared and called her names, a long trip to Bethlehem when she was “great with child,” giving birth in a barn, and a flight to Egypt in the middle of the night.

But through it all there was the good news that the Lord was with her and had filled her with his grace. That good news was delivered to her by the angel back when Elizabeth was six months along.

The Lord is with you, and he fills you with his grace: right here; right now, four Sundays into Advent, Faith Lutheran Church, Oak Lawn, IL.