God Promises a Savior

Winter Quarter: Creation: A Divine Cycle
Unit 1: The Savior Has Been Born

Sunday school lesson for the week of December 4, 2016
By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Lesson scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Beginnings are always exciting and filled with expectations! This new quarter is no different. The journey begins at a very familiar place, but will take us on an unusual route to our destination. Let us trust God for the result!

We begin with a message from God to a young woman in Nazareth named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a carpenter. Nazareth was a small town off the beaten path in Galilee, about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. Only four miles away was a very large Roman city named Sepphoris, where many like Joseph could find employment.

The messenger was the angel Gabriel, who is named nowhere else in the Bible except in Daniel. He greets her with a word of joy and assures her she has nothing to fear.

Think about the many times in scripture this injunction “Do not be afraid” is used! Luke uses it often! Check out 1:13; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:32. We humans live in fear of many people and circumstances. God tells us: “Do not be afraid!” God may not always keep us safe, but God does keep us. Thanks be to God! To live fearlessly is one of the major gifts of God’s abundant grace.

In Gabriel’s greeting, there is also the announcement of an awesome event to take place using the body of this unknown teenager.

Gabriel’s language is filled with meaning, not just for Mary, but also for the whole of Luke’s Gospel. For example, the word in Greek for “greeting” is the same word used in the Parable of the Prodigal when the father “rejoices” when his son comes home. Therefore, Gabriel’s greeting is one of great joy. We will return to angels announcing great joy on Christmas Day. Also, the word translated “favor” is from the word in Greek whose root is “grace.” Grace is just as important in Luke’s Gospel as in the writings of Paul. Grace is a gift of God.

In the same way, our own journey begins with this same gift of God. God does not read our resumè to see if we are qualified to carry out the task entrusted to us! The One who calls us will empower us. In addressing Mary, the angel is telling her “God needs YOU!”

In verses 31, 32 and 33, Gabriel inundates Mary with crucial information that will play into her response. Read them carefully. The mother will name the baby – usually done by the father
(another indication of how special Luke treats women)! His name will be Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew) which means “God saves.” The meaning of the name and the linkage to the Old Testament hero is not accidental. Moreover, he will be called “Son of the Most High.” That phrase is only used one other time in Luke in the account of the Gerasene demoniac. (Luke 8:28) Gabriel links the birth of Jesus with the messianic hope centered in the house of David. His kingdom will be endless which echoes Isaiah 9:6-7.

As Luke’s story unfolds, Jesus will refocus the thrust of God’s kingdom and action in a way expanding Jewish nationalistic messianic expectation to encompass the whole world. Indeed, He will be crucified because He did not live up to His name. He did not save them from Rome!

Nothing is said to indicate why God chose Mary. She is perplexed from the initial word, and, when she learns what the task is, she is incredulous! “How can this be?” Or, “Why me Lord?” God’s ways are not our ways. For Mary, her question is obvious. She has never had sexual relations, so how can she have a baby? Don’t let your class get bogged down in the endless debate about the virgin birth! Just listen to Luke’s description of Gabriel’s answer to her question.

Two powerful actions are described. The first is the work of the Holy Spirit. Here is another hallmark of Luke’s Gospel. We have already mentioned his lifting of women to prominence, now the Holy Spirit comes to the fore. The work of the Holy Spirit in creative acts goes back to Genesis. As the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep, so the Spirit will hover over Mary until the creative word is spoken by God. When God says, “Let it be,” Mary will respond “May it be with me as you have said.” The creative Word is met with the accepting word of a teenager. Both are required for the salvation of the world!

The second powerful act, as described by Gabriel, is an overshadowing of Mary by God’s power. Again, Luke will use this unusual word later in his account of the Transfiguration to describe the cloud that surrounds Jesus, Peter, James, and John on the mountain. Here Luke immerses us in the mystery of God. Neither words nor doctrines can explain what will occur with Mary. Gabriel puts an exclamation point to it all when he declares: “For nothing is impossible with God.”

The Lesson Annual quotes the beginning of Theodosia Garrison’s poem “The Annunciation.”

God whispered and a silence fell;
The world poised one expectant moment…

In teaching this lesson, several questions came to our mind:

- What is it today in this holy season that brings you great joy?
- Does this season of Advent bring an awareness of God’s power to act, or are you disillusioned, wondering, “When is God going to clean up this mess?”
• Have you considered that God is whispering to you, “I am going to do something, and I need you to help me do it!”

“Poise one expectant moment” and enter into Mary’s story. We too can become part of what God is doing in God’s world.

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