

This the time of the year where final touches to plans are being made to enjoy the Christmas season, and as 2020 draws near to an end – *and thank you Lord for that*, plans are being considered for the upcoming year. Plans are important, and although I can be spontaneous at times, I tend to be the kind of guy who likes a good plan – as I think most things turn out better with a good plan, but with that said, experience also tells me that things don't always come together as they are planned – things don't always turn out the way we had planned.

Almost 40 years ago, Trish and I were on our way from Corpus Christi, TX to central Illinois. We were young newlyweds in love, and we were going to spend some time at my grandparent's vacant farm for our honeymoon. I had worked all day before hitting the road, we had driven for many hours, it was well past midnight, Trish and I were dog tired, and we looking for a place to stay – any place to spend the night – a Motel 6, a Motel 3, or a Motel 1 – it really didn't matter. We were that tired. We had planned to spend the night in a small town in eastern Texas that we were positive had some lodging for us, but let me tell you – things did not go as planned.

We took the exit into town, looking for a place to stay. As we are driving towards the center of town, we noticed a large crowd of people (maybe 30 or so) gathered in the middle of the street that we were on. It's now probably 1 in the morning, and it looks like they are involved in some type of meeting or rally in the middle of the street. And what got our attention was that some appeared to be wearing long robes. So, I'm stopped at an intersection – we are the only car in the area, and we are looking at this crowd of people, as they are now looking back at us. I don't know if we had mistakenly drove up on a KKK rally or some religious cult gathering, but I knew for sure we weren't sticking around to find out what they were doing. I recall making a right-hand turn at the intersection to get out of town and back to the interstate.

This is no joke, every time we made turns to get away from those crazy people, we ended right back where we started – back at the same intersection with those crazy people. It made no sense. This happened several times, and I was thinking this had all the ingredients for a really, really bad horror movie like “Children of the Corn.” I had seen enough of these scary movies over the years, and I was convinced that Trish and I were the two-stupid young people who were going to die that night!

Eventually, thank God, we made it out of there in one piece, and drove far, far away with a renewed burst of energy.

So, that crazy experience – although we laugh about it now, was most definitely not part of any plan we had envisioned for our relaxing get away trip to my grandparents’ farm. It wasn’t on our honeymoon agenda – anywhere.

I think there is a natural desire in most of us for things in life to make sense and to fall in place as we have planned, but we know that sometimes they do not. There is a common saying that goes like this, *“If you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans!”* Sometimes our plans, even though they may be great plans, are not God’s plans, and God has this habit of changing our plans to His plans. And sometimes, according to God’s plan, there are major unexpected events that redirect the course of our entire lives. Sometimes there are unplanned circumstances, beyond our control, that dramatically change us.

Last week, we looked at one such example involving Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth. If you recall, Zacharias was in the temple performing his priestly task of burning incense – a once in a lifetime opportunity for a priest, but then he got a surprise visit from the angel Gabriel. Bear in mind, that up until that point, heaven had been silent for 400 years, so this was surely an unexpected surprise for Zacharias. Anyway, Zacharias got a baby announcement from Gabriel that in his ripe old age, he was going to be a dad for the very first time. His wife Elizabeth, who had been barren all her life is going to bear a son, and he will be called John.

This was great news for this elderly couple, especially Elizabeth who goes so far to say *“This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.”* Elizabeth had endured disgrace in their Jewish culture due to her inability to have children, but now she *feels* favored by God in her old age. The truth was, even when she was barren, Elizabeth *was in* God’s favor – she just confused God’s favor with God’s timing, and that’s an easy mistake for us to make as well. Don’t assume God has abandoned you, don’t assume God does not care for you, don’t assume you have fallen out of God’s favor because God’s plans and His timing are not in sync with your plans and your timing. Don’t make that mistake.

Now, if you remember the rest of the story, Zacharias wants a sign from the angel Gabriel due to his lack of faith, so as a sign, Zacharias gets to learn a version of sign language as he loses his ability to speak – he becomes mute until John is born.

Having a baby at this time in their lives was all part of God’s plan for Zacharias and Elizabeth; even though, I feel confident in saying that having a baby was not part of any plans they had made for themselves. Those plans were long gone, years ago, but as I have said, God has this habit of changing our plans to His plans.

This morning, we are going to continue to work our way through the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke, where the angel Gabriel is not done making baby announcements, and yet once again, he reveals another one of God's plans to an individual who I imagine also had completely different plans.

Our passage begins in **Luke 1:26**; however, I want to read the first four verses of **Luke 1** before we get there.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

I wanted to start here for an important reason. I think it may be easy for some to consider the Christmas story and those events leading up to the story as being similar to a fairy tale, like a Golden Book story that begins with "*Once upon a time,*" – but what we see described in this passage is a thorough, careful, accurate, and deliberate investigation conducted by a very educated and driven man – Luke, who is a physician. So, the story I am about to read is a real story, with a real angel, real people, real places, and real events.

So, with that said, let's jump down to **verse 26** and get into this real story.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, God took the next step in His plan of redemption and salvation, and He sent the angel Gabriel to the village of Nazareth to deliver another birth announcement.

Nazareth was an obscure and insignificant little farming village in the region of Galilee, well off the beaten path, with a population of only a few hundred people. This village was so obscure and so insignificant to the Jews in the region that it explains why Nathaniel later asked his brother Philip, "**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**" when he learned that Jesus had come from that village.

So, Nazareth was this little village in the back woods – in the sticks so to speak, yet, according to God's plan, the angel Gabriel was sent specifically to this place to speak to a virgin named Mary.

Now, Mary was an ordinary girl, who at this time, was likely a very young teenager, somewhere around the age of 13 or 14 years old. She is a normal girl, and, just like any normal girl, I imagine Mary probably grew up having the same dreams and plans that other normal teenage girls had had in that culture – dreams and plans of marriage, having a home, and a raising family just like her mother did and her grandmother before her.

And, Mary was already moving in that direction as she's betrothed to a young man named Joseph who's a righteous man, a carpenter, and in the family line of David. Betrothal is what we would consider an "engagement" today, but it's more than that. In those days, after the two families negotiated and made arrangements, girls were usually betrothed to their grooms, soon after puberty, somewhere around the age of 12 or 13. The couple were pledged to each other in a formal ceremony, and this pledge was legally binding – in essence, they were husband and wife; although, they could not live together as husband and wife, nor have sexual relations until the betrothal period was completed – which tended to be one year.

So, for all practical purposes, Mary seems to have a good plan, a sensible plan, a realistic plan, a plan that's already set-in motion – a plan she could fully expect would come to pass. It seems that Mary has got it all figured out, but as I said earlier and I will say it again – God has this habit changing our plans to His plans. Let's see what happens as we continue the story with **verse 28**.

And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Mary is apparently alone in her parents' home, and just like Zacharias in the temple – poof – the angel Gabriel shows up, and he greets Mary by calling her "**favored one**". That word "**favored**" implies that Mary has received God's undeserved, unmerited grace in a special way. In other words, she is not favored by God because of something she has done, or because of where she was from, or because of her age, or because she passed some kind of religious test – rather, God has graciously singled Mary out because He wanted to, His favor rests upon her, and God has chosen her for use in His plan.

Gabriel tells Mary, "**The Lord is with you**" which was often said in the Old Testament to individuals who were called to some great task by God. For example, in **Exodus 3:12**, God told Moses He would be with him when given the mission to bring the people out of Egypt. In **Joshua 1:9**, God told Joshua He was with him before entering into the Promised Land. In **Judges 6:12**, Gideon is told by an angel that the Lord was with him before he was to lead 300 men into battle

against an enemy of 135,000 fighting men. Mary is no different, and neither are we. The words **“the Lord is with you”** are words we need to always remember, especially when God is in the process of changing our plans.

Well, understandably, this unexpected visit by the angel Gabriel and his choice of words were startling to Mary. We read in **verses 29-30**,

But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.

So, the highly favored one of God is also a confused and troubled one. Mary’s not sure what to make of the angel’s words – she doesn’t know why she is being greeted so honorably, but Gabriel understands this, so he repeats his reassuring and comforting words to her. **“Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.”**

And then Gabriel shares the birth announcement with her beginning with **verse 31**, and to say it’s a doozy is an understatement!

³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

That’s some birth announcement. *“So, Mary, congratulations – you’re going to be a mother. Your baby will be a boy, and you will name him Jesus. And oh, and by the way, just so you know – He is the Son of God – the long-awaited Messiah that you and your people have been hoping for. He’s the King, not a king, but the King who will ultimately rule forever. Oh yea, one more thing, Elizabeth is having a baby too, and she has a 6-month head start on you.”*

Well, Mary is trying to take all of this in, and no doubt this is overwhelming for her, and she asks a question, **“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”** And Gabriel answered and said to her, **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”**

I read an interesting comment by Warren Wiersbe about this passage. He said the word “**overshadowed**” is applied to the presence of God in the holy of holies in the Jewish temple. In essence, Mary’s womb became a holy of holies of sort for the Son of God. That’s a gracious honor bestowed upon Mary.

Now, some have questioned why Zacharias was left mute for 9 months when he asked Gabriel for a sign after receiving his birth announcement about John, but Mary receives no consequences for asking her question of Gabriel. The answer is fairly simple. Zacharias lacked faith and wanted a sign to determine *if* what Gabriel said was true. Mary, on the other hand, accepted what Gabriel said as being true, she simply needed clarification as to *how* it would happen. Her question was about the *how*, not about the *if*.

In regards to the virgin birth, I know there are those who doubt it – even those who profess to be Christians, but I have no difficulty whatsoever with the virgin birth of Jesus or any other miracle mentioned in the Word of God. If you can accept the first four words in the Bible, **Genesis 1:1** – “*In the beginning God*” – if you can accept that God created the very first man without a father or a mother – created him from the dust of the ground, then you should have no difficulty with the virgin birth.

Now, shifting to the idea of God’s plans, there is something said here that’s really striking in Gabriel’s announcement. **Did you notice the certainty in his words?**

You will conceive and bear a son. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will have no end. The Holy Spirit will come upon you Mary. The power of the Most High will overshadow you Mary. The holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

These promises are going to happen Mary, they will happen, they must happen, and oh by the way, nothing will be impossible for God.

When Gabriel makes this birth announcement to Mary, I am sure Mary had a pretty good idea that her life would not continue as she had planned. Her plan, although a good one, was not even remotely close to the plan that God had for her.

Although, Mary was favored by God and the Lord was with her, we know she would have many difficulties and painful sorrows ahead of her.

- Mary is going to become pregnant, which would be very hard to explain to others. **What do you think her parents thought?** Probably the same thing you would have thought if your daughter told you that story. **And what about**

Joseph? Joseph could have divorced her, and he actually considered doing that very thing, if it weren't for an angel who set the record straight in a dream.

- Mary could have been whipped or even stoned to death for allegedly committing adultery, and one can only imagine the gossip being circulated in a small village like Nazareth.
- We know that King Herod becomes jealous of the reported birth of the Messiah and slaughters all boys two years old and under in an attempt to kill her son Jesus. Joseph and Mary had to flee some 200 miles into Egypt, only to return to Nazareth after Herod had died.
- Mary was a widow. We know this because on the cross, Jesus asked his disciple John to take care of Mary. We don't know when she became a widow, but the last time we hear about Joseph was when Jesus was 12.
- Mary was there when Jesus died. Mary watched her son be wrongfully accused, publicly humiliated, literally beaten to a pulp, and horribly crucified. Mary personally witnessed this and could do absolutely nothing to help.

Mary did not know this was in store for her – she was not given these details of God's plan by the angel Gabriel, but she did know she was highly favored by God and that God was with her.

During the Christmas season, we are reminded that we are highly favored and God is with us as well. We know this because God sent His Son into the world and would later pay the ultimate price to prove His love for us. We also know that God has His own purposes, and His own plans, and sometimes His plans collide with our plans. We are told in **Proverbs 16:9**,

“The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”

Does this mean we are not supposed to make plans? We should make plans, but we need to be willing to adjust our plans – maybe even abandon our plans altogether, as God reveals His own purposes and His plans for our life.

How did Mary respond to the message from Gabriel? Look at **verse 38**.

And Mary said, “Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

In essence, here's what Mary did in her response to Gabriel. She handed God a blank sheet of paper with her name signed to the bottom of it, allowing God to fill in the details of His plan for her life. That's what she did. **Can you do that?**

God has this habit of changing our plans to His plans, and maybe you have been handed something that you did not expect and did not want. It was not part of your

plans, any of them, and you are trying to understand it all, but regardless of what you are facing, regardless of what you are experiencing – like Mary, trust that you are highly favored by God, that He is with you, and determine in your heart that you will seek God’s will and trust that He has a much better, more rewarding plan for you.

Source Material:

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