



Luke 1:26-38
 Christmas: Fake News?
 Surprising News

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This morning we continue our series of messages that will take us through the end of the year. “Fake News” is a social phenomenon, and a problem, in our world right now. It’s hard to discern real news from fake news sometimes. People claim that “Fake news” is real, trying to convince others of its so-called truthfulness. Or real and truthful news is attempted to be discredited and labeled as fake news. This even impacts Christmas: from the birth of Jesus to Santa, how do we discern what’s real and what’s fake? And then we all get different kinds of news at a more personal level, at different seasons of life. Last week we talked about news that creates anticipation in us. The Israelites, in the midst of their exile, got news that created anticipation for their future. And we saw how what Isaiah wrote extends even beyond their time and their national future, to impact the whole earth. This news created anticipation about what God will do in the future. So in this series we’re looking at different kinds of news, how it impacts us, and tying it all to the news of the Christmas event, the birth of Jesus.

And today we’re talking about surprising news. **We’ve probably all received news at different times that was surprising, and it can be surprising in a good way, or surprising in a bad way.** If you didn’t watch the Apple Cup on Friday evening, and you’re a Cougar fan, you might have been surprised to wake up Saturday morning to read the news about who won. If you’re a Husky fan, it wasn’t really surprising at all. ☺ If you read about the accident that one of the busses had getting the UW band and cheer squad to the game, that was surprising. And then it was surprising and very touching news that in order to honor the UW band that ended up not completing the trip to the Apple Cup, the WSU marching band learned and played the UW fight song just before the start of the game (and afterwards, someone told me after the first service). That was really cool...a show of solidarity beyond the fun and games of a rivalry. A little over 6 years ago, when I told my family and friends here in the Seattle area and told the church I was serving in Chehalis at the time that I was going to be the next pastor here at Rose Hill, that was very surprising news to them. It was pleasantly surprising for some of them, and surprising but sad for others. The news of

the death of a loved one, an acceptance letter into a university, getting a job offer, and so much more...are the kinds of times we get surprising news.

And in today's passage Mary gets some really surprising news. **It begins with a surprising visit from the angel Gabriel.** Gabriel is mentioned in the book of Daniel a couple times, where he helps Daniel to understand a couple dreams that he has. Gabriel also appears to Zechariah, just a bit before today's passage, to let him know that he and his wife are going to be expecting a baby boy. So Daniel, Zechariah, and Mary, are the only three people in Scripture that Gabriel speaks to. So for Mary, having Gabriel show up like this is something surprising. It's not every day that Gabriel shows up. In fact, it's not every day that an angel of any name shows up Scripture, or in our own lives. **An angelic visit is so rare, that when someone speaks of an angel appearing to them, many people write it off as fake news.**

Many years ago, before I knew Gwen and her family, her mom, Rose, was in a bad car accident, and she's given me permission to share this story. She pulled out of her driveway, on her way to an appointment she had that morning. And as she pulled out of the driveway, a car came flying up the road well over the speed limit, around a slight bend just before their driveway. She pulled out into the road, believing the way was clear, and instead of continuing on her way, this other car slammed into the drivers' door of her car at an estimated 50 miles per hour, completely sending her car down the road and off the edge of the road toward an embankment. Her car came to rest just short of the embankment.

And in the midst of this, even as she was sliding uncontrollably toward the edge, she had this strong presence of God with her, that at the time and still to this day she believes was an angel with her in the car. To this day, she can recall how it felt like there was somebody in the car with her, and the very presence of God brought her great comfort and peace, that everything was going to be ok. After the car came to a rest and she slowly got her wits about her, she realized that in fact she was completely ok, not a scratch on her...even though the car was a total loss. And then this strong presence she felt of God with her, perhaps through the presence of an angel, then disappeared.

It was as though God visited her with an angel to give her reassurance and peace about the outcome of this terrible accident. Now, Rose didn't actually see anybody with her...she didn't audibly hear a voice...but there was a sense that someone was in the car with her in that moment. And then that sense disappeared. **Mary's experience here is even more specific and just as unexpected. And with it, comes some very surprising news.**

First, Gabriel tells her that she is highly favored and God is with her. This certainly isn't bad news. In fact, it's really good news...but it's probably surprising. In fact, in the next verse, verse 29, we're told that she was greatly troubled at Gabriel's words.

Gabriel can tell her discomfort at the situation, and then says to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God." Now, at this point, I can kind of relate to Gabriel. I'm no angel, but on many occasions, as pastor, I've said to people, "Hey, I'd like to get together and talk about something." And frequently, the response is something along the lines of, "Who, me? Why would you want to talk to me?" And the other person will start having visions of the pastor asking them to consider serving in some way and it scares the bejeebers out of them.

And so quite frequently, it's surprising to people when there's a pastoral visit but no obvious reason for the visit – let alone an angelic visit. I can only imagine that a visit from an angel would be even more fear-inducing. It was for Mary. **And she was not looking for this; she was just going about her business.** She's completely surprised. She was engaged to Joseph, so a lot of her time was probably planning their wedding ceremony, making the guest list, working with caterers, ordering flowers, getting a photographer lined up, working on a reception at one of the local hotels or the local community center, attending bridal showers, and probably finding out if there might be any family connections to get someone who could change water into wine. Oh, 30 years too soon. Whatever the customs were of the day when a wedding was being planned, that's what she was doing; Pretty normal stuff for a bride-to-be. So she's not anticipating this tap on the shoulder from Gabriel. We often aren't anticipating a tap on the shoulder, and an invitation

to serve, either. It can be surprising.

But the presence of Gabriel was the least of the surprises, perhaps. Because then came the news from Gabriel that he came to deliver. Her favor with God is going to lead to a pregnancy, the child who will be born is going to inherit the throne of David, he will be called “Son of the Most High,” and will have a kingdom that will never end. I mean, talk about surprising news, right? She certainly wasn’t anticipating *that!*

And Mary’s response indicates her surprise. She says, “How will this be, since I’m a virgin?” Her response is interesting, because when Gabriel announces this news of what’s going to happen, he doesn’t say when it will happen. But the presumption she makes is that it will be really soon (before she’s married) and Gabriel confirms that.

And Gabriel says it can happen because God will make it happen. Her pregnancy is going to be a supernatural one. God can do these kinds of surprising things and in fact as a testimony to all of this he tells her that just so you know I’m telling you the truth, your aunt Elizabeth is pregnant even though she’s old enough to have her AARP card.

By the way, that isn’t very old, I’ve recently discovered. This last spring I was mailed an invitation from the AARP to join their organization. And no, they weren’t giving me 10 or 15 years of advance notice; I had to reply by May 31, 2018. So apparently 45 years old is old enough, or they sent it to the wrong address. Or maybe they made a clerical error and the invitation to join the AARP was supposed to go to Gwen, instead. I don’t know.

Anyway, even now, Elizabeth pregnant, even though she’s too old and was said to be barren. It’s kind of an invitation for Mary to verify what the angel says is true, and in the verses following today’s passage, we see Mary going off to visit Elizabeth and share in each other’s good news of babies to be born.

So all of this is really surprising news, because Mary is far from the ideal candidate for being pregnant with Jesus, especially in their day. She’s not

yet married. She's going to be pregnant before this marriage, and even give birth before they're married. It's going to put a crimp on their honeymoon. Rumors will fly. Joseph will end up considering not going through with the marriage. Undoubtedly they got a lot of sideways looks from the people in their small town of Nazareth where everybody knew everybody. Because of the census that we read about a bit later, she has to travel several days to Bethlehem because that's Joseph's ancestral hometown. And they make the trip when she was probably pretty well along in the pregnancy (although we don't know for sure because we don't know how long they were in Bethlehem before she gave birth) and ends up giving birth there, laying the baby in the feeding trough of the animals. So that's the road they'd end up travelling. Mary couldn't foresee all of that...but some of it she probably could. And so, the moment the angel told her what God was going to be doing, she had to know it wasn't going to be easy. And what's her response? "No way, Gabe. You got the wrong Mary. There are a lot of Mary's around here, and I think your GPS sent you to the wrong one"? No...she simply said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." It's a simple but profound response.

There are two things I want us to take away from this passage. **First, God oftentimes surprises us when He taps us on the shoulder and wants to work through us in some way.** For instance, Mary seems to be far from the ideal candidate, as I said, and God's calling upon her is NOT setting her up to have any sense of normalcy in the first year or so of her marriage – and really, beyond that, too.

Can you imagine if Mary had said, "Well, I'd be happy to serve in this way, but right now just isn't good. I'm not yet married, I'm still a virgin, there's rumor of a census in a few months and I'll need to travel several days. And I'm just really busy planning my wedding right now. Can you try again in a year?" It seems as though she's far from perfect for this role God is asking her to play. She doesn't seem to have the qualifications. **What we see here, and throughout Scripture, is that: God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called.** God demonstrates his power by working through people who we might not naturally pick to be in these kinds of roles. We might even say that God specializes in working through surprising and unqualified

people: Moses stuttered, but led the Exodus from Egypt; Rahab was a prostitute through whom God worked to help bring His people into the Promised Land; David was the youngest of like 7 or 8 brothers but was the one tapped to be the King in waiting; The apostle Paul was a persecutor of the early church but God chose to work through him to start several churches and have his letters in the Bible. God specializes in working through surprising people. And he still does that today. It may be surprising when an opportunity to be used by God in the church or in someone's life comes your way, but that doesn't mean God has made a mistake.

I won't go into the whole story of how I became a pastor because I've shared that a few times previously...but when I first started considering the possibility of being a pastor, I thought God had the wrong guy. For one thing, pastors have to be at church early on Sundays. And I'm not naturally a morning person. I wasn't comfortable speaking to a group of people larger than about 7 or 8...and about the only place I *was* comfortable even then was on the ski slopes teaching kids to ski. The idea of leading worship, or teaching classes, or preaching, was really intimidating and scary...and just didn't seem to fit me. Maybe God is seeking to work through you in some way as well, to bring about his purposes. And maybe that is kind of surprising, and you're not sure about stepping into whatever it is. We see here, as we see so oftentimes in Scripture and in real life, that God works in surprising ways, and through surprising people, including you and me. So that's the first thing for us to take away from this passage.

Second, we can learn a lot from Mary's response, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). This is the response of openness to God's leading. It's the response that realizes that even though this opportunity to serve may not be ideally timed...She may not feel like she's the best qualified person for it...She may not really even want to do what God is asking her to do...But Mary's response is one that steps out in faith, and models trust and openness to God's surprising ways.

How is God calling you to live out your faith...perhaps especially to serve as Mary was asked to serve? I'm not saying God might be asking you to have a supernatural pregnancy...but simply by serving in some way. Is it surprising?

Is God giving you an opportunity that catches you off guard a little, but just as Mary's "yes" became a blessing for us, a "yes" from you might be a blessing to others as well? Or maybe you're in the midst of serving in some capacity and this is a confirmation that God has you right where he wants you. That He's going to work through you to bring about his purposes, because of your faithful "yes" to his invitation.

Let's step out in faith with Mary, as God invites us into ministry, whether that invitation is through the voice of an angel, someone here at the church, or we simply see a need. Sometimes it might be in surprising ways. Mary got some surprising news from Gabriel, and a surprising invitation to be a servant of God. **But because she said yes, God worked through her to bring Jesus into the world to transform lives like yours and mine.** Let's keep it going, with our own "yes" to God; our own step of faith offering ourselves as the Lord's servant so his word would be fulfilled. And as we do, the surprisingly good news of Jesus Christ will continue to be proclaimed here at Rose Hill, blessing others and transforming lives, for generations to come. Let's pray...Amen.