

Unexpected News
Luke 1:26-38
December 20, 2020

Dr. C. Kavin Rowe, a New Testament scholar from Duke University, has written a new book called, “*Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*.” This book was published in October this year. In this book, Rowe argues that at the beginning of Christian history, the message of Christianity was surprising, powerful, creative, and world-shaking but more than two thousand years later, its message has lost its freshness and surprising quality. The message of Christianity has become so familiar, common, and expected that it has lost its power to astonish and to transform lives. He says that we need to rediscover the surprising and transforming power of Christianity that is relevant to our society.¹ The question is “How?” How do we do that?

The gospel is the story of surprise. Christ’s birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, none of which is ordinary or expected. All of it has the impact of surprise and astonishment.

Consider his resurrection. The one who was dead is now alive! What could be more surprising than that? Can anyone say that the dead coming back to life is ordinary or common?

Pastor Phil Callaway tells of the time when he drove through his town with his five-year-old son. There was a local cemetery. As they were passing the cemetery his five-year-old son saw a large pile of dirt. The workers dug the ground to prepare for an internment. Seeing the pile of dirt, the five-year-old son said: “Look, Dad, one got out!”

Calloway laughed at the time. But, he writes, “. . . every time I pass a graveyard, I’m reminded of the One who got out.”²

Not only his resurrection is full of surprise, so is his birth. Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth this way. The messenger of God, the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to an elderly priest named Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, despite her old age. Elizabeth and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were cousins.

¹ <https://divinity.duke.edu/news/christianitys-surprise-sure-and-certain-hope>

² *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2006) Cited in Davis, Barry L. *52 Sermons From the Gospel of John* (GodSpeed Publishing, Kindle Edition).

Five months after Elizabeth conceived a child, the angel Gabriel visited Mary. Luke describes that visit as follows: “In the sixth month, (the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy) God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’”

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’”

“‘How will this be? I am a virgin.’” Mary asked the angel.

Mary is a virgin, and she’s going to have a baby. Is this something she should get excited about? Is this good news? Mary is a teenager and she is engaged to be married to Joseph. They both live in a small community where there are hardly any secrets. People know each other very well, and this community is strictly ruled by religious laws and customs. Mary’s pregnancy outside of wedlock, would endanger not only Mary’s engagement, but also her life as well. Mary can be stoned to death for that. Is this really good news? Imagine how this news will hurt Joseph. What kind of God’s favor is this?

Not only this, but later in her life, Mary will watch her beloved son who is to be given the throne of David and to rule the house of Jacob forever being executed as a common criminal on a cross. Is this the life that is favored with God? Evidently being favored with God does not mean that you are protected from life’s challenges and difficulties.

When the angel Gabriel said that Mary was blessed by God, he did not mean that God would make her life easy. What he was saying was that Mary would be used by God for his magnificent purpose. That is what “being blessed” or “being favored with God” means.

This story gives us one significant message. That message is “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary asked the messenger of God, “How will this be? I am a virgin.”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will make it happen. The power of God will cover you. The child you will have will be the Son of God. Hard to believe? Your relative Elizabeth, who is old, is going to have a child. She was barren all her life, but God caused her to have a child. She is in her sixth month of pregnancy. Nothing is impossible with God.”³

Giving Abraham and Sarah a child, giving Zechariah and Elizabeth a son, causing virgin Mary to have a child, are they any different? They are all miracles. Jesus’ birth is a miracle.

Some years ago, a New Testament scholar Fred Craddock (1928-2015) was visiting Bethlehem. There was a Jewish man who explained the Christmas story to Dr. Craddock. They were standing in Shepherd’s Field, a field where the shepherds might have been when the angels appeared to them. “On a clear night,” the Jewish man said, “if you stand here and look toward the city, you can see a bright star, and it looks like it’s standing right over the houses. And that is what happened at Christmas.” Of course, this Jewish man was confusing the shepherd’s story with that of the wise men, but Craddock didn’t try to correct him. The Jewish man went on to say that this was how people got confused and thought there was a star over the house where Jesus was born. When he finished, Craddock said, “Well that’s one way to look at it.”

Then the Jewish man said something very interesting. He said, “I know that’s just one way to look at it. When I was in school,” he continued, “the rabbi explained everything in the Bible two different ways. When he would come to a miracle, he would explain it two different ways. His reason was this: If something happens and you can’t explain it another way, then God didn’t do it.”⁴

Think about that for a moment. God always gives us a second way to look at anything that happens. Perhaps our faith is like that. Perhaps that is why people disagree with faith matters. God never overpowers us with certainty. Everything we think we know about God is limited. We can never understand God fully. Our understanding is limited. That is what our faith is; limited. Our faith is nothing but our conviction but that is enough. That is enough to serve the Lord and enough to love him.

³ Luke 1:34-37 paraphrased.

⁴ *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

One message that is clearly communicated in our passage is that with God nothing is impossible. Next time when you are facing a major difficulty, remember – “Nothing is impossible with God!”

Another very important message this story communicates is that God’s blessings are experienced through obedience.

When the angel Gabriel gave Mary the news that she would bear God’s son, Mary could have rejected it. If she did, I am sure God would have found another way to bring Jesus into this world but this is how Mary replied: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” It is this absolute obedience that made Mary the mother of the Savior.

Obedience may not be a fashionable character in our “do-your-own-thing” society but obedience is an important element in Christian life.

On Christmas Eve of 1985 Chuck Colson was visiting several prisons in North Carolina to share the Christmas message with the prisoners. After these speaking engagements, he watched the news. It showed Mother Teresa ministering to two young men who were dying of AIDS.

When a reporter asked Mother Teresa, “Why should we care about criminals with AIDS?” Mother Teresa said, “These young men had been created in God’s image and deserved to know of God’s love.”

When Colson saw it, he wondered, “How could she do it? How could she embrace those men who were dying of that deadly disease?” Colson didn’t think he could do that. It was 1985, and we didn’t know much about how AIDS spread. Back then, a lot of people thought you could get AIDS by being close to AIDS patients. That is what Colson believed as well.

The next morning Colson preached to several hundred women prisoners. As he was getting ready to leave, the warden asked if he would visit Bessie Shipp, an AIDS patient in an isolation cell. “It’s Christmas,” explained the warden, “and nobody has visited her.”

Now, this was very scary for Colson because he believed he could catch AIDS by being near to someone who has it. Then he remembered what Mother Teresa did, and he said, “Well, all right, take me to Bessie.”

When they arrived at the isolation cell Colson discovered a petite young woman bundled up in a bathrobe, reading a Bible. They chatted for a few moments, and since there wasn't much time, he got to the point. "Bessie, do you know Jesus?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I try to. I read this book. I want to know Him, but I haven't been able to find Him." And Colson took one of Bessie's hands while the chaplain took the other, and together they led Bessie in prayer. When they finished, she looked at them with tears flowing down her cheeks. It was a life-changing moment, says Colson, for Bessie and for him.

Three weeks later Bessie Shipp, a new person in Christ, went to be with Lord. Colson confessed that he did not want to visit Bessie because of the fear of AIDS but God, working through Mother Teresa's example, took away his fear and allowed him to minister to Bessie.⁵

Chuck Colson's life had been blessed enormously by his obedience to God. That's the message of this story - Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. Remember, "Nothing is impossible with God!" and the "Blessings of God are experienced through obedience!"

⁵ Charles Colson, *Being The Body* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2003, pp. 336-338).