

**The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 24, 2023**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

## Operation Incarnation

Luke 1:26–38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

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**The angel answered [Mary], “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (v 35).**

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Had He wanted to do so, God could’ve sent more than twelve legions of angels into Nazareth (Mt 26:53). He could’ve acted with a show of force and a dazzling display of might. Who would’ve stopped Him? Jewish freedom fighters would melt away before the angelic hosts. Roman legions would be no match for them. After lighting up the night sky, they would’ve easily gained a foothold. From there, they could’ve pushed on toward Jerusalem, and beyond. Had He wanted to.

But that’s not how He chose to do it. Not this time, not yet, not like that. Instead, **the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary** (vv 26–27). Just one angel, one powerful angel, without warning or fanfare, sent to the most unlikely place and the most unassuming person for a top-secret meeting.

How far would God go to carry out His plan? Long before He’d established the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. So glorious! He’d given them kings to rule over them, especially David, a prince over God’s people and a man after His own heart. So powerful! He’d sent prophets to proclaim His word—Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and more. So striking! But this time would be different. He had another plan to execute, a special, undercover operation, and it involved this young woman. The time had come.

**The angel came to her and said, “Rejoice, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (v 28).** What work did the angel interrupt? What had Mary been doing the moment before? She might have been sweeping the house or washing clothes or cooking dinner, just the ordinary, everyday sorts of things that you and I do all the time. Nothing special.

Nothing that said God was about to enlist her in His most important operation yet. Imagine if the angel had come to you as you were taking out the trash and greeted you like that. How would you react? Mary sure didn't know what to think. She was puzzling over those words—"rejoice" (*for what reason?*), "favored one" (*how am I favored?*), "the Lord is with you" (*why me?*). Why indeed? Because of God's great love with which He loved her and loves us!

That's when the angel Gabriel divulges the plan: Operation Incarnation. God has chosen to enter enemy-occupied territory. He will establish a beachhead on earth. The rightful king is landing in disguise to carry out a great campaign of sabotage against the powers of darkness, sin, and death (*Mere Christianity*). And it begins with her—with her womb.

**"Don't be afraid, Mary, for you've found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus"** (v 31). What if Mary had stopped the angel right there and said, "Hey, whoa! My body, my choice! You can't use me or my life for this special operation. Hands off! God can take His plan somewhere else." But she didn't. She listened, amazed, wondering. And the angel went on: **"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end"** (vv 32–33).

How will God establish His forever kingdom? How will He carry out His reign and rule on earth? How will He push back the darkness, atone for sin, defeat the devil, and overpower death? He makes the first breach in Mary's womb. It will be through her Child, a son, this Jesus. He will be the light shining in the darkness, a light that no darkness can overcome. God's greatest invasion began nine months before Christmas. It was first launched, conceived with this announcement from the angel to Mary, and then in due time it would be birthed. God comes to redeem and restore His creation, and He starts with her, in her, through her. The angel teaches her who her Child is and what He will do.

It's all a bit much, I think. My head would've been spinning, too. All Mary can say is, **"How will this be, since I'm a virgin?"** (v 34). She knows how nature works, and she's never known a man—not like that. How could she possibly have a child?

So the angel tells her: **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God"** (v 35). And with those words, it happens. God, who spoke light and life into being, now causes her to conceive by a word. The Son of God enters her womb

through her ear. God has taken on flesh inside of this young woman. Now, she is the mother of God. It's the last thing she expected. It's the last thing we would expected. If you were looking for God to carry out a grand invasion of the world, you might've looked everywhere *except* for there. Truly, His thoughts aren't our thoughts, and His ways aren't our ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts (Isa 55:8–9). How wonderful!

To confirm what he's said, the angel gives her a sign: **“And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God”** (v 37). Nothing will be impossible isn't a statement of all the things you and I might dream up. The angel didn't say, “Nothing will be impossible *for you*” or “All your dreams will come true” but “nothing will be impossible with God.” He can dream up and do whatever He wants. He can even make an old woman—or a virgin!—conceive and have a son.

But perhaps the greatest miracle of all is what Mary says next: **“Behold, I'm the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”** (v 38). Which is to say, “Amen! This is most certainly true.” She believes it, every word of it. For God to become man is one thing, but for a man or a woman to believe it is another! Both are God's work. That's why Mary can be called the first New Testament Christian. She's the first to believe that her Son, Jesus, is the Son of God and Savior of the world. She's the paradigm of the Church and the model of all who believe. May we imitate her in this way! Thirty years later when a woman raises her voice and says to Jesus, **“Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!”** he sets her straight by pointing to the real cause of blessedness for Mary and for us: **“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”** (Lk 11:27–28). That's exactly what Mary did.

Mary believed, **and the angel departed from her** (v 38). His assignment was over. His work was finished. And Mary likely returned to her work, too, to her daily chores and mundane life. She picked up the broom and returned to sweeping.

But what God was doing inside of her had only just begun. In fact, what started there continues to this very day. Operation Incarnation hasn't ended. It's still ongoing. From Mary's womb, to the cross, to the grave, to the skies, the heir of David is now enthroned on the right hand of the Father. And He's still at work bringing His eternal kingdom, pushing back the darkness, forgiving sin, stopping the devil's mouth, and promising resurrection and life to those threatened by death. Yes, the darkness is deep. Yes, the shadows are long. But you know what God is up to. You're part of the resistance. You have pledged allegiance to King Jesus and belong to His kingdom. He's shared with you the plans for this special operation—not just the beginning but the whole of it.

This same Jesus who was conceived of the virgin Mary, the Holy One, the Son of God the Most High, David's greater Son, ruler over the house of Jacob, and king of a kingdom without end—this same Jesus, with that same body and blood, continues the invasion here. He breaks through from heaven to earth into your ordinary, everyday life. Rejoice, O favored ones, the Lord is with you! And we wonder, whom am I, and how shall this be, and why? Because He loves you!

And He comes to your ears. And He enters into this bread and wine. Nothing will be impossible for God—not even for the Son of God to give you His body and blood under these earthly means. What He began in the virgin Mary, He continues here, now, with you, with your body, your life. You are part of His invasion force. You are the salt of the earth, for you are seasoned with Christ Jesus Himself. You are the light of the world, for His light shines in and through you. The kingdom of God isn't retreating. It isn't on the defensive. It's coming by Holy Word and Holy Sacrament to make you holy, too.

Don't be afraid, Christian, for you've found favor with God through Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Don't be afraid, but be bold and courageous, for even now your King sits on the throne, and His kingdom is coming by grace. Live as His people. Live as though your sins are forgiven and you are free. Live as if the kingdom belongs to you. Live now as though you will live forever. For you will! You will live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

And soon, very soon, **the Son of Man, Jesus, is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father** (Mt 16:27) in the culmination of this Operation Incarnation.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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*Phil 4:7*