

“You Will Conceive”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you.” So spoke the angel Gabriel when delivering what was unquestionably the most important – and the least *expected* – pregnancy notification in all of human history. And when she heard it (no surprise) Mary did not understand what Gabriel was talking about. Oh, she heard the words plainly enough; but she could not *conceive* in her mind the meaning of the message from God that the angel was speaking to her.

For he had said, “The Lord is with you”. Those are loaded words. Sure, Mary knew that the Lord God of Israel is everywhere present, so she’d always had a vague sense that the Lord was with her in that sort of cloudy, intangible way; but, good Jewish girl that she was, she also immediately understood that Gabriel meant much more than that. This was a messenger from heaven using the kind of language she listened to when she heard the Scriptures read at the synagogue. “The Lord is with you.” It’s the kind thing that was told to the great heroes of the faith: the men specially chosen by God like Jacob, the Father of Israel, and Moses, the great deliverer and law-giver, and David, the mightiest and most noble king in Judean history. It is not the kind of thing you expect to hear if you are a poor, teen-aged, peasant girl, living in the backwater town of Nazareth. “The Lord is with you.” It means that God himself is present and active in your life, guiding your footsteps and directing you in his service. It means he’s got big plans for you and great things to accomplish through you. Mary wondered, “*What could God possibly want to do with me?*”

Gabriel told her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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 ...” In others words, “Mary, you are about to become the mother of God. You have been chosen to give birth to the Savior of the world. You will cradle, nurse, and raise your child who is the King of all Creation.”

And note that it’s not the exalted role she will play in salvation history that she stumbles at, but rather the mechanics of how it could possibly take place. She’s engaged to be married, yes; but she’s still a virgin. And she understands enough biology to know how babies are made. So she couldn’t conceive in her mind how she could conceive in her womb. And that’s interesting, isn’t it, that we use the same word, *conceive*, to mean both grasp an idea, and also become pregnant? It’s not a coincidence. Rather, as you might expect, the word “*conceive*” is closely related to the word “*receive*”; and this is true both in the English and the Greek of the New Testament. The main difference in the words *receive* and *conceive* has to do with *where* they take place. For the most part, *re-ception* is external. You receive a gift in your hand, or you could receive a beating on your body – but it takes place on the outside. *Con-ception* is internal. When a story is presented to you, like the one in this morning’s Gospel reading, you are able to *conceive* an image of it inside your mind. Or you might take what you’ve learned from any number of sources and put them together to conceive a new idea. Either way, it’s inside your head; and to a certain extent, it’s part of you. Likewise, when a fertile woman is exposed to the seed of her husband, she may *conceive* a child inside her womb.

And what we are to see in this morning’s text is that Mary is unable to conceive either way. She is doubly incapable of conception. She can’t grasp in her mind what the angel says

to her, nor, being a virgin, can she become pregnant. She's completely stumped. So she asks in bewilderment, "*How can this be?*"

Gabriel has the answer: "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*". That is to say, this is going to take the direct, miraculous intervention of God. Only God's Holy Spirit and his divine power can cause this conception to take place. But that's not a problem because God has long been in the business of making humanly impossible conceptions happen. Recall that the wives of the Patriarchs were all infertile women. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was ninety years old and long passed the age of child bearing when she conceived Isaac. Rebekah was married and barren for twenty years before God intervened and she bore the twins Jacob and Esau. Rachel, Jacob's wife, was unable to have children until God opened her womb. Likewise, the mothers of mighty Samson and the prophet Samuel, and yes, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, were all unable to conceive until God used his power to change them so that they could bear children. It is a major biblical theme that God miraculously causes conception to take place in those who cannot do so by their own natural powers. The same was true for Mary.

And that's the point of this morning's Gospel. But I'm not only talking of physically becoming pregnant – I'm also talking about conceiving in human hearts and minds what the Lord reveals to us through his Word. I'm talking about faith and trust in the Lord. That also requires a miraculous conception. You see, the sin-darkened heart of every person is hard, stony, infertile ground for God's Word. We cannot by our natural abilities conceive in our minds what God says to us. St. Paul writes, "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit. They are gibberish to him. He cannot understand them for they are spiritually discerned." And the entire history of the nation of Israel proves it. No matter how many times the Lord planted the seed of his Word, it never took root and grew because the people tried to make it grow by their own natural powers. But they were dead. Spiritually speaking they were *infertile*, so nothing could grow; and therefore they never really understood God's message or believed it – except for a relatively few individuals in whom was operating the Spirit and power of God. In them the Holy Spirit conceived a living faith.

And hopefully *now*, by the power of God's Spirit working in you, you too can conceive the Word of God you're hearing me speak. His Word is living seed. And where his Holy Spirit and power are at work, the Word can be conceived in the human heart. That's how faith begins. It's how faith grows. And it's how God gives life to the new person that he is creating and growing within you. You might think of it all as the "spiritual facts of life". By God's Word the Holy Spirit makes those who can't, conceive.

We can take it a step further. Remember that "the Word of God" is one of the names for the Son of God. St. John writes in the first chapter of his Gospel, "*the Word was with God and was God ... [and] the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" He's saying that Jesus Christ is the Word of God. And since he is the Word, when we hear God's message, *he* is the Seed that is planted within. So follow the thought through: When the Holy Spirit causes conception to take place so that we understand and believe God's Word, what is it, or rather *who* is it that's conceived within us? Well, it's Jesus, of course!

So what the angel says to Mary also applies to you. When you hear God's Word, "You will conceive", like Mary, having heard God's Word, you *have* conceived the Son of the Most High. The difference is that you did it in your heart and mind. We even say this in a number of well known Christmas carols, like *Little Town of Bethlehem*, which has a verse with this line: "*Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us*"

today.” Or there’s *Hark the Herald*, in which we sing, “*Come desire of nations come, Make in us your humble home*”.

Of course, I’m speaking of things spiritual; but then, I want you to see that rightly understood, what Gabriel said to Mary when he first greeted her, today he also says to you: Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you.” He really is within your body. For Mary it was true in two ways; but like her, you can rejoice because what is conceived in you *is* the Holy Son of God. And I want to stress too that what I’m saying is not *merely* spiritual. Where Christ our Lord is, he is present in both his spirit *and his body*. You can’t separate the two. And that he makes himself bodily present in us through his Word should come as no surprise. I mean, though it’s an amazing truth, we believe that he does that to mere bread and wine when his Word is spoken over them – and though it’s not true in the same sense, how much more should we acknowledge that he is bodily present in us when his Word comes to us? Jesus is in us.

Now, I want to be careful not to push the analogy of pregnancy too far; but we can draw a few comparisons that may be helpful. You know, for example, when a woman is pregnant she has to think about the life that is within her. She has to concern herself more about nutrition and exercise, and getting regular checkups, and so on. In a similar way, the life of Christ in us needs to be zealously cared for so that it develops properly. We need to see that we’re fed spiritually with more of God’s Word, that we give ourselves checkups by examining our hearts and actions in light of the law of love; we need to engage in the exercises of prayer, study, and worship. We also need to avoid taking in things we know to be spiritually harmful. These may slow the growth, injure – perhaps even kill the life of Christ in us. In many ways, the life of Christ in us is our responsibility to guard and keep.

Another comparison to pregnancy we might draw is the fact that as Christ grows within us, it’s going to become apparent to those around us. You can’t hide him. He’s going to make himself seen in your words and actions. And as time goes on, if things are developing properly, he should become increasingly more apparent in your life ... increasingly more apparent until you reach the day when you are delivered completely, that is, when this old body is cast aside and your new life in Christ is all that is seen.

But like all analogies, eventually this one too breaks down. By the power of the Spirit working through the Word, Mary conceived a flesh and blood baby who had to grow to maturity. In our hearts, by faith, has been conceived the Savior who died for our sin and rose to life again. He’s not a helpless infant. He is your Lord and God. You rely and lean on him. It’s he that cares for you, bears your burdens, and helps you in every need. *The Lord is with you*. It’s he that feeds you, forgives your sin, and cleanses your soul. The goal is to turn ourselves over to him: to be his feet, his hands, and his mouth in the world; to let him direct our thoughts, guide our footsteps, and order us in his service. Why? Because like Mary, and Moses, and David, he’s got big plans for you and great things to accomplish through you.

But a word of warning is in order: sometimes it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that just because the Lord is with us, everything we think and do that looks and sounds about right is from him. That’s what happened to David in this morning’s Old Testament lesson. Reflecting on all that the Lord had done for him, David felt a little guilty about not having done more for the Lord. He thought he’d build a nice big temple to sort of pay God back. Sounded like such a good idea, it even fooled the prophet Nathan. “The Lord is with you”, he told David, “Do whatever it is you’ve conceived in your heart.”

And often I hear the same thing in Christian circles. People will say things like, “I think the Lord wants me to do this or that”, or, “I’ve prayed about this, and the Lord has laid this on my heart.” We need to remember that old sinful nature is also in our hearts, and it can deceive us. Apparently noble goals and good intentions are not necessarily what they seem. What really was at work in David’s case was human pride. He wanted to feel that he’d done his part. He wanted to add an element of using his natural power to try to please God. He wanted to hand something back to God and say, “Here you are Lord, I thought up a way to return your kindness to me.” And the prophet Nathan must have liked the idea of having a nice new temple to worship in. But that night they both got a little refresher course in the Gospel. The Lord told Nathan, “Go remind David how this relationship works. *I do things for you.* You do not do things for me beyond what I have specifically asked you to do. Go tell David to forget about doing me favors. Tell him instead to hold his hand out, because I’ve got a lot more I want to give him – and that through him, through his body, I will accomplish great things.” The irony is that David wanted to build God a temple – a place for him to dwell. What David didn’t see was that the Lord already had place to dwell. It was in him: David’s own body was God’s temple.

And in the same way the Lord is with you, *and in you*, and he has great things he wants to accomplish through you like he did through David and Mary. And the way he is going to accomplish them is by giving you even more of what you cannot conceive by your own natural powers. Instead, by the power of his Spirit, his Word (that is, his Son) will work within you to cleanse your heart and mind, strengthen your trust, and equip you with the gifts of his Spirit by which you will be transformed and made fruitful for his service. For the human mind cannot conceive of the things God has planned for those who love him. The Psalmist asked, “*How shall I repay the Lord for all his kindness to me?*” His answer is amazing. He said, “*I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.*” That is to say, “The only way I can repay God is to receive the gift of salvation he’s given me in Christ Jesus, and place my trust in him.”

That’s what Mary did. May each of us likewise open our hearts to receive God’s all-encompassing divine favor and also say with her, “*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word.*” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!