

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 13 December 2020**

Children's Talk: Differences Between John and Jesus

- Last week we read about the angel Gabriel coming to Zacharias.
- This week we're reading about the angel Gabriel coming to Mary.
- These stories are quite similar.
 - As we read the story for today, think about what's similar between these two stories and what's different.
- Luke 1:26-31 (NKJV)
 - ²⁶ Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"
²⁹ But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS."
- So far the stories are pretty similar.
 - Angel comes to a person.
 - They're scared.
 - The angel tells them not to be scared and that something wonderful is going to happen.
 - The wonderful thing is that a baby is going to be born.
- But then things start to get different; the angel says more about who the baby born to Mary would be:
- Luke 1:32-38 (NKJV)
 - ³² "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."
³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"
³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ For with God nothing will be impossible."
³⁸ Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.
- Can you start to see some differences in the stories now?
 - Like Zacharias, Mary asked a question about how it was going to work; but, unlike Zacharias, she wasn't doubting she was just wanting to understand.
 - Also, there is a pretty big difference in the promises about the babies that they were going to have.
 - The baby that was going to be born to Zacharias' wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby who would *prepare* people for the Lord.
 - Mary was going to have a baby who would *be* the Son of God.

- People sometimes start thinking that maybe Jesus was just a really good normal human being.
- But we can see, in the differences between these two stories, that, right from the beginning, Jesus was going to be different from any baby that had ever come before and any baby that's been born since then.
- *Amen.*

“Let it Be to Me According to Your Word”

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith

13 December 2020

(Adapted from a sermon first preached 11 December 2011)

Intro

- The story for this week begins with these words: “Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth...”
 - “In the sixth month...”—the sixth month of what?
 - The sixth month of Elizabeth being pregnant with John the Baptist.
- Last week Joel read the story of the angel appearing to Zacharias and telling him that he and his wife Elizabeth were finally going to have a child, despite their old age.
 - And Joel talked about the promise that this child who was to be born would turn their people back to the Lord.
 - It seems too good to be true and so Zacharias doubts.
 - And Joel talked about how we too doubt whether the Lord can actually bring about lasting change in the world or in our individual lives.
 - But Elizabeth does indeed conceive and so, despite being mute, Zacharias begins to hope that his prayers might actually be answered.
- That was last week.
- This week we come to a very similar story—the story of the angel coming to Mary and telling her that she was going to have a baby.
 - And I was a little confused by this when I first thought about it.
 - If John the Baptist’s message is turn back to the Lord and repent of the evil things that you’re doing, what more do you need than that?
 - What’s the second story for?
- It is very clear in the text that John is not enough.
 - He was sent to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Isaiah 40:3) but he was not the Lord Himself.
 - When he was grown up he said to the people he was baptising, “I indeed baptise you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).
- Today, we’re going to contrast the story of Zacharias and John with the story of Mary and Jesus and see if we can understand what’s going on here.
 - It has to do with the kind of salvation that the Lord wants to offer us.
 - The distinction is much more than just intellectually interesting; it gets to the heart of things and I personally found that it gave me more hope than I had before about my own spiritual state.

“Blessed Are You Among Women”

- One obvious contrast is between the two mothers in the story: Elizabeth and Mary.
- Think about the difference between an old married woman and a young woman engaged to be married.
 - The old woman was probably fairly set in her ways and she was childless and probably feeling rather resigned and hopeless about ever having a child.
 - The young woman, who might have even still been a teenager, was probably filled with youth and excitement about the possibilities of her new life.
 - Think of the excitement and idealism and love that you’ve felt coming from people who are engaged or about to get married.
- Mary, in us, represents that same sort of excitement and idealism but about learning the truth from the Lord and living according to it.
 - The phrase that’s used for this in the teachings of the New Church is “the affection for truth”.
 - It doesn’t just mean that you feel fond of the truth or something—it means a longing or calling to be affected by the truth that comes from a deep and innocent love for the Lord.
 - The affection of truth is perfectly expressed by Mary’s final words to the angel: “Let it be to me according to your word.”
- A key part of being affected by the truth is being willing to do things differently from the way we used to do them or the way other people are doing them.
- This gets into the meaning of Mary’s name.
 - Her name comes from the word for rebellion.
 - This isn’t an immature kind of rebellion—rebellious just for the sake of rebelling.
 - One time when Derrick Lumsden preached about Mary he used the phrase “innocent rebellion”.
 - It’s an attitude that is totally happy to do things differently from the way they were done before.
 - Elizabeth and especially Zacharias were doing things the same way that they had been done for hundreds of years; Mary wasn’t constrained in the same way.
- All of us have both Elizabeth and Mary within us.
 - No matter how old or young we are, we have part of us that is more set in our ways and jaded about things ever getting better and part of us that is always innocent, idealistic and willing to try new things.
 - And it’s too easy to look from that jaded part of ourselves at the idealistic part of us or idealism in somebody else and make fun of it.
 - “That idealism will soon be gone once she experiences the ‘real world.’”
 - But Mary is the one who is uniquely blessed.
 - The angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”
 - Of all the women—of all the feelings that we experience—Mary is the most blessed and favoured.
 - This is the same reason that Mary Magdalene and not one of the disciples was the first one to see the Lord in His resurrection on Easter morning.

- After you're done listening to this sermon, I recommend that you spend some time trying to connect to that Mary feeling within you.
 - And by the way, the Lord has made sure it's somewhere inside each and every person, no matter what they've done.
 - It might take more work for you to connect with it, but's in there.
 - And that's the thing in you that can give birth to Jesus.

In the Sixth Month

- But Jesus can't be conceived in us until John has been conceived first.
- There's an important developmental truth contained in the fact that the angel only comes to Mary when it's "the sixth month for her who was called barren".
- Elizabeth hid herself for the first 5 months but now, in the sixth month, everyone knows about it.
 - Elizabeth and Zacharias are gaining confidence that they really will have a child.
- And, in us, this is the experience of seeing the potential of repentance—seeing that we can have success not acting on our selfish motivations.
 - An example of this might be someone who has eventually figured out they sometimes say careless things that can be quite hurtful to people.
 - After this person identifies this problem, they try to do a better job of noticing when they might want to say something that could be hurtful and instead they don't say it!
 - When they're in a conversation there's still a part of them that really wants to say that funny little joke at someone else's expense.
 - It's witty; people would laugh; but they manage to just not say it.
 - That's really exciting. That's the potential of John the Baptist.
 - Something new and powerful really can be born.
- And it has to come first.
 - But it's not actually the end goal.
 - This is the baptism with water—taking the truths and washing our lives with them—cleaning up our act.
 - But, One mightier than John the Baptist is coming who will baptise us with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16).
 - It's the Son, born to Mary, whose name shall be called Jesus.
- Jesus means Jehovah saves.
 - Salvation is much more than just a change in behaviour.
 - The fact that we can change our minds and get out of our stuck ways of thinking is a miracle in itself—it was miraculous that Zacharias and Elizabeth conceived in their old age.
 - And the fact that we can change our behaviour is even more of a miracle than just changing our minds.
 - But salvation is about changing our *hearts*.
 - Salvation would be getting to the point where we can be in a conversation where we used to want to make jokes at other people's expense and we honestly have no desire to do that anymore because our hearts have changed.
 - Instead we love to find ways to make other people shine in a conversation.

- This spiritual developmental progression can be seen in the progression of the chapters of the book *True Christianity*.
 - First, there's a chapter on repentance.
 - It explains how important it is to identify specific evils in our lives to fight against with the Lord's help.
 - It talks about how important repentance is for forming the church in us and it talks about how John the Baptist and his preaching of a "baptism of repentance" prepared the way for the Lord (§510).
 - And then, directly after that chapter, is a chapter on Reformation and Regeneration.
 - Repentance leads to reformation or the reforming of our minds, worldview and priorities and then that reformation leads on to us being born again or being regenerated by the Lord with new hearts.
- Here are a few statements from these chapters in *True Christianity*:
 - *True Christianity* §510
 - Before repentance, we stand outside regeneration. In that condition, if any thought of eternal salvation somehow makes its way into us, we at first turn toward it but soon turn away.
 - *True Christianity* §587
 - [W]e are reformed by means of truths that our intellect receives. Truths teach us who to believe in, what to believe, and also what to do and what to will.
 - During the phase called our reformation, we come to mentally see and admit that evil is evil and goodness is good, and make the decision to choose what is good. When we actually try to abstain from evil and do what is good, the phase called our regeneration begins.
- This is why John had to prepare the way for the Lord and why Elizabeth had to be six months pregnant before the angel could come to Mary.
 - But the promises made by the angel about what Jesus would do are way beyond the promises about what John would do.

“And He Will Reign Over the House of Jacob Forever”

- Joel mentioned last week that the context of this whole story is that it happened “in the days of Herod, the king of Judea” and that this represents a time when darkness and evil seem to be prevailing in the world around us and within ourselves.
- This context makes it even more powerful that the angel says this about Jesus:
 - Luke 1:32-33 (NKJV)
 - ³² “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”
 - The promise is that the Lord is going to be on the throne instead of Herod.
- A little bit further on in the story, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth and, when she arrives, she speaks beautiful words of gratitude and thanksgiving about what the Lord has done.

- In these words we can hear joy in the Lord's salvation and a repetition of the theme of a change in who is in power.

- Luke 1:46-55 (NKJV).

- 46 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
- 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.
- 48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
- 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.
- 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.
- 51 He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
- 52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
And exalted the lowly.
- 53 He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich He has sent away empty.
- 54 He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
- 55 As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever.

- *This* is the promise of the Lord's salvation.

- And to get a sense for just how awesome this can be, think about what it would be like if this were true in the natural world.
 - All the selfish, corrupt people, kicked out of their positions of power and replaced by humble servants.
 - All the people longing for food, filled with good things.
 - All the people who misuse their wealth, stripped of all of it.
- Those would be huge changes and society would be totally different and the same is true for our inner world when the Lord is in charge.

- This is more than just repentance.

- This is more than just managing to stop doing bad things.
- This is a spiritual change of government, a revolution.

- Spend a bit of time reflecting on what this might look like in your life.

- Take the areas of your life with the most pain and struggle.
- Take the areas where you have fought for years to try to be a good person—where you've worked your hardest to repent.
 - Maybe it's with issues around lust.
 - Maybe it's around resentment and hatred.
 - Maybe it's around anxiety and control.
 - Maybe it's in unhealthy dynamics in your relationships with other people.

- Take that area of your life and first imagine that you're able to stop all the negative behaviours on your side.
 - Then take it a step further and imagine that your mind has been reformed to see the whole situation in a different light.
 - And then imagine having a different heart.
 - Imagine the Lord being entirely in charge of the situation.
 - Imagine you feeling absolutely no pull to do anything harmful but instead a humble desire to serve other people as best you can, following the Lord's guidance.
- And try to imagine all of that not in some unrealistic hypothetical world but actually in this natural world with all its challenges and setbacks, still try to imagine those situations with a new heart from the Lord.
 - This thing happens, or that difficult thing happens again but you're able to respond to it from a good heart.
 - That's the promise of the Lord's salvation.

“How Can This Be, Since I Do Not Know a Man?”

- It's beautiful and it can be hard to understand how that could happen in our lives.
- Luke 1:34-35 (NKJV)
 - ³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”
 - ³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.”
- To explain the significance of the angel's response I want to read from an article by Peter Buss, Sr.
- I think he captures it really well.
 - Jesus had no human father. He was conceived of God. That central truth of Christianity has a perfect parallel in every human life, for charity [or genuine love for our neighbour] has no human [father]. When charity is born in us it is because the Holy Spirit comes upon us, and the Power of the Highest overshadows us, and that Holy Thing which is born within us is truly the Son of God.

For the Lord is born in us as He was born on earth, and the manner of His birth is the same. We might claim the credit for fighting our evils, we might even feel we deserve the contentment with which we are then blessed (although we would be wrong).

But how can we think that we give birth to the spirit of charity? How can we ever believe that we teach ourselves to love others as much as or more than we love ourselves? The power to love another human being is born of God. There is nothing in human inventiveness that could create it.

“How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” asked Mary. How can I have charity when I have not enough wisdom and understanding to conceive of it. Well, we don't conceive charity. Almighty God does; and forever that spirit will be “God with us.”
 (“Two Stories of Christmas: Part 2,” *New Church Life* 1981: pp.568-577)

- This is the miracle of Christmas—that unselfish love can be born and come to rule in our hearts.
 - How can this be?
 - The Lord God will accomplish it because nobody else can.
- Although He does still need our co-operation.
 - And the teachings of the New Church explain how that works:
 - *Divine Providence* §§118-119.
 - A person has to put away evils from their external self as if of themselves. ...

The Lord then purifies the person of the lusts for evil in their internal self and of the evils themselves in their external self. ...[T]he Lord cannot purify a person of them before. For evils reside in the external self, and lusts for evil in the internal self, and the two go together like roots with a trunk. Unless the evils are put away, therefore, no opening is given; for they block the way and close the door, which the Lord can open only through the agency of the person.... Thus when a person as though of themselves opens the door, the Lord at the same time then roots out the lusts.

Conclusion

- If we return to the questions we started with about why we need anything after John, I think this passage is really helpful.
 - We can see our efforts to put away evils in our external selves—our efforts to not do bad things—as the John the Baptist work.
 - It's really important and must happen to prepare the way of the Lord.
- And then the Lord's work of rooting the evils out of our internal selves is Jesus being born and salvation and regeneration.
- On the one hand understanding this doesn't change the work that we need to do but, on the other hand, I find that remembering that there's more that can come after hard repentance work makes the hard repentance work seem a lot more worth it.
 - It's not just an endless slog and fight; it's leading to somewhere better spiritually.
 - Thanks to the Lord's Word we know that regeneration or being reborn is possible; we know that we can be given a hard of flesh in the place of a heart of stone.
 - When we remember that we can say to the Lord, like Mary did to the angel, "Let it be to me according to your Word."
- *Amen.*