
In this annunciation, Luke makes clear that God comes with good news for ordinary people from little known places. This king will not be born to royalty in a palace, but to common folk in a stall. Here Luke highlights the role of the Spirit, a special emphasis in this gospel.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

How can this Be?

When I was very young, one of my favorite stories for my parents to read was Hop on Pop. In that Dr. Seuss’s rhyming book for young readers there’s a page that reads like this:

SEE BEE We see a bee.

SEE BEE THREE Now we see three.

THREE TREE Three fish in a tree.

Fish in a tree? How can that be?

How can that be? Why would fish be in a tree? That’s silly, unlikely, unexpected! Fish don’t go in a tree, Dr. Seuss! Birds go in a tree.
How can this be?

There are two women. One the wife of a powerful priest in the center of the most important city, most holy city for people who worship the God of Abraham and Isaac.

The second woman, a teenager, in the backcountry of an out of the way land, far from power.

A prophecy proclaims that a new king, a savior will be born in this land. Who is more likely to bear this child? The wife of a priest in the seat of religious power, even though she seems too old to bear children?

Or her cousin: a young woman who has no power, no connection, no money, no real hope of being remembered for anything?

An angel comes to the priest, and says, “Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth, though she is barren, will bear a son, who will lead many people to follow God, and he will prepare the way of the Lord.”

And Zechariah said, “How can this be? I’m old, and my wife is getting on in years?”

And the angel Gabriel said, “I come from the presence of God, and these things will occur.”

How can this be?

The angel then went to visit the young woman, Mary. And said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” Mary was confused, and wondered what this greeting was all about. And the Angel continued: “Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him, Jesus, God Saves. He will be God’s son.

And Mary said, “How can this be?”

“How can this be? I have not been with anyone. How will I become pregnant?”
And the angel said, “Nothing is impossible for God.”

There was a family. There were two sons, who had grown up, and had successful careers and families of their own. But his past year, their father, who they dearly loved; who played baseball with them when they were young, and who went hunting and fishing with them, and shared wisdom; this father died this year. And they grieved, and their mother grieved. As they prepare for Christmas, they look at an empty chair, they prepare to celebrate Christ entering into the world, but they wonder, “How can this be?”

There was a gathering place. It was owned by a local man, who devoted his time to running this place. The place offered a warm place to play cards and catch up on the latest news in cold times. A place to have a drink to ease the troubles of the day, and to see a friend, knowing that we aren’t in this difficult time alone. One day the man heard a pop from the kitchen. A fire had started. It went quickly. The firefighters of the town, many this man’s friends, did their best to put out the fire, but it was too late. It was too strong. And the gathering place, his livelihood, the warmth of a place to be together was gone. As Christmas comes, with its word of hope, his family wonders, “How can this be?”

There was a nurse. Each day when the nurse went to the hospital, more and more people, some that she knew, would come to the hospital, sick, with a cough that just wouldn’t stop. The hospital beds were filling up, and she worried that she would catch this cough and bring it to her young children. She prayed that this would end, but the virus did not seem to care about her prayers. And then she heard that her mother caught the cough. And she worried, and she cried out, “How can this be?”

There was a church. Because of this cough that spread so quickly and without care for feelings, the church decided not to gather on Sundays so that more people wouldn’t catch the cough and the fever; so that more people wouldn’t die. As Christmas came closer they wondered how they
could have Christmas without their traditions. How could they have Christmas without candles, and singing together, feeling the warmth of gathering with friends, families, believers, all together. How could Christmas still come? How can this be?

We have lived through a time that feels upside down. As if there are fish in a tree. Living through this time has made the normal concerns, and the unexpected twists and sorrows more difficult to bear. Without gathering together in our buildings, without hugs, without a kind and sympathetic nod and smile, it has led us to wonder whether we can get through this time at all. We wonder, How can any of this be?

Martin Luther noted that “St. Bernard declared there are [in the annunciation] three miracles: that God and humankind should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; and that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. The last is not the least of the three. The virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become human is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is that this young woman should believe the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God. … She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that he is the son of the virgin and of God, as to believe that Son of God is ours. God feeds the whole world through a Baby nursing at Mary’s breast. This must be our daily exercise: to be transformed into Christ, being nourished by this food.”

How can this be? God came into the world at Christmas, not through the high priest, not through the most powerful rulers, not through the strongest, the rich, or the most impressive. God came into the world through Mary. A young woman from a place no one had heard of. If Christ came into the world through Mary, who wondered, “How can this be?” and still had faith, then perhaps we can also trust, we can also have faith that Christ continues to show up not just in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, but also
today in Hegg, in Franklin, in Blair, in Ettrick, and in the homes of the people of North Beaver Creek and Blair Lutheran Churches. Christ will still show up in those homes that have an empty chair this year. Christ is present for those who feel they’ve lost everything. Christ is there with those who are sick. And Christ is present on Christmas, even if we don’t enter a church building. Christ continues to show up through those we love, through kind strangers, through helping one another in difficult times, through prayers and phone calls and Christmas cards. Even as we continue to wonder with Mary, “How can this be?” We can also, hearing that God can do what is unexpected and mysterious, we can respond, “Here I am, let me serve God in the way that I can. Let it be, according to God’s word.” How can this be? Allow God to let it be. And allow God to be with you now.

Friends, though it seems unlikely, unexpected, and impossible, Christ has come, is coming, and will come again, into the world and into our hearts.

Amen.