Another Baby on the Way!

1. Let's take a look at Luke 1:26-27. What insights can we gather about Mary from this passage? Who was she, and what relationships or connections does she have? What characteristics or qualities do you think made her God's chosen one?

- In the simplest terms, Mary is an ordinary person with no special significance. She is the epitome of God building His kingdom in this world in an upside-down way. This reflects what is often termed the "_____" scandal of particularity—how God makes choices that don't always make sense to us and are based solely on His grace, without any merit or worthiness in us. For example, God chose Abraham in Genesis 12, and David was chosen over his seven older brothers in 1 Samuel 16. These instances illustrate that it's all by grace.

- However, it's fascinating to note that Mary is related to Elizabeth, who hails from the lineage of Aaron, the older brother of Moses and the first High Priest of Israel. This connection is significant because Mary is chosen to be the mother of the true High Priest—Jesus—who will open the way for us to access the Holy God.

  Hebrews 6:19 beautifully captures this hope, stating, *"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf."* Additionally, Hebrews 10:20 tells us that Jesus has provided "*a new and living way which he has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh."*

  Furthermore, because Joseph—Jesus' adopted father—is from the line of David, Jesus embodies both kingship and priesthood. This remarkable lineage highlights the divine design in His identity, bridging the roles of king and priest in a way that fulfills God's promise and brings us closer to Him.

- Additionally, Mary just so happens to be a virgin! In Isaiah 7:14, we read: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* This verse is familiar to many of us, especially around Christmas time. However, its significance reaches back over 700 years before the birth of Jesus! Luke again takes us back to the Old Testament.

  At that time, King Ahaz was the ruler of Judah, and he found himself in a precarious situation. He feared that a powerful alliance between Israel and Syria might lead to the destruction of Judah. In a bid to protect his kingdom, Ahaz was even considering an alliance with Assyria as a form of insurance.

But God had a different plan. He sent the prophet Isaiah to remind Ahaz of His steadfast promises to be with His people. In fact, God invites Ahaz to ask for any sign—no matter how incredible—and God would grant it to demonstrate His faithfulness. Surprisingly, Ahaz turns down the offer, refusing to ask for a sign, preferring Assyria's protection. So, God decided to give Ahaz a sign anyway!

The sign that God provided is found in Isaiah 7:14: a virgin would conceive and bear a son, and this son would be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us." This prophecy was much more than just a message to King Ahaz; it pointed toward the ultimate act of salvation. It shows how God would become one of us, entering the world in a humble and miraculous way—born of a woman!

In the immediate context of Isaiah's prophecy, it's essential to consider that there would have been a young woman known to Ahaz who would soon have given birth to a child. This child's birth would have served as a tangible sign of God's presence and reassurance to Ahaz. In the preceding verses, Isaiah makes a profound statement: before this child is old enough to discern between right and wrong, God would demonstrate to Ahaz that he could confidently abandon any reliance on Assyria for protection. Ahaz unfortunately doesn't learn his lesson and his choice to ally with Assyria, later will lead to Assyria invading Judah. (2 Kings 18:13, 2 Chronicles 32:1, and Isaiah 36:1).

But Isaiah 7:14 isn't just a localized promise; it was a sneak peek into a much grander narrative! Isaiah 7:14 serves as a pivotal point in Scripture, this sign becomes THE SIGN! It is the ultimate sign pointing ahead to a far more significant truth—the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The verse resonates across centuries, unveiling a divine plan that encompasses all of humanity.

In the face of uncertainty, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by worldly fears and pressures. We often seek refuge in temporary solutions, just as Ahaz contemplated turning to Assyria. But the beauty of Isaiah's prophecy reminds us that we don't need to place our trust in anything worldly or fleeting. Instead, we are invited to rest in the promise of "God with us."

This prophetic declaration isn't merely historical; it's a heartfelt invitation to recognize that God Himself desires to be intimately involved in our lives. In the person of Jesus, we see that God stepped into our broken world—He became Emmanuel, God with us.

✞ Also, God's choice of Mary echoes back to a significant moment in the Bible known as the "Protoevangelium," found in Genesis 3:15. In this verse, God reveals a powerful promise: there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and the woman's "seed" will ultimately triumph over evil. This remarkable prophecy points to a future deliverer who would be born of a woman only! One who would defeat the hold that sin and darkness has upon mankind.

When we think about this promise, it becomes clear that there is only one person in all of history who fulfills this role in the most literal sense—Jesus Christ. He was born of a woman, truly and miraculously from her "seed." This is most certainly the fullest sense of what Paul says in Galatians 4:4-5 – "But when the fullness of time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.

This connection underscores the incredible significance of Mary's role in God's grand plan of salvation. Through her, God brought forth the Savior, who would conquer sin and evil once and for all. It's a beautiful reminder of God's faithfulness and the miraculous ways He works through ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary purposes!

- ✞ Finally, throughout Scripture, Israel is often depicted as a woman, referred to as the "daughter of Zion." The prophets illustrate Israel as God's unfaithful wife, yet God remains steadfast in His promise to reclaim her. Importantly, God foretold that the Messiah would emerge from Israel, making Mary the new "daughter of Zion" through whom God brings forth His Son.

  This marriage imagery continues in the Gospels, where Christ is portrayed as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride. In this context, Jesus, God incarnate, comes to reclaim His beloved bride—the Church, which awaits Him (as seen in the parable of the ten virgins in Luke 25:1-13). This emphasizes Mary's virginity and her role as a reflection of the Church, the pure bride of Christ.

  The New Testament reinforces this analogy further. Revelation 12 depicts a woman who gives birth to a Son destined to rule all nations (12:5). After His ascension, she, like the Church, faces attacks from the devil, along with her children—all Christians (12:17). Thus, Mary is not only the mother of God's Son but also symbolizes the nurturing church, which "mother's" all believers.

❷ Read Luke 1:28. What does Gabriel mean when he says, *"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"?*

Since the seventh century, the Roman Catholic Church has maintained the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, officially recognized as doctrine in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. This doctrine asserts that Mary was conceived without the "stain" of original sin, a condition that affects all humans due to the fall of Adam and Eve. According to this belief, she received divine grace from the moment of her conception and lived a life completely free from personal sin.

Though this belief is deeply entrenched in Catholic tradition, it is important to note that it is not explicitly stated in the Bible. Yet, proponents of this doctrine often cite Gabriel's greeting in Luke 1:28, particularly the phrase in the Latin Vulgate that reads "Hail, Mary, full of grace." The original Greek word, kecharitōmenē, means "full of grace" or "highly favored." But the perfect tense of this word implies that this grace is a completed action with lasting significance.

- ✞ Why do we reject the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, and how can Mary be considered "full of grace" while still being subject to the original sin that all humans inherit?

- ✞ Also, what errors does the belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception create concerning the broader understanding of sin and the need for salvation in Christianity?

Rome's interpretation can be misleading. While the term does imply that Mary was graced by God, it fails to support the notion that she was exempt from original sin. The very concept of original sin is rooted in the need for salvation, a need that the Church asserts applies to all humanity—including Mary herself.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception undermines the fundamental Christian belief in the universality of sin and the redemptive work of Christ. If Mary were truly without sin, how can we justify the necessity of Christ's sacrifice? The idea of Mary as a sinless vessel not only distorts the biblical narrative but also raises theological inconsistencies that question the integrity of the Catholic Church's teachings. Ultimately, the belief in the Immaculate Conception seems more like an attempt to elevate Mary to an unreachable status than a genuine reflection of the biblical message about salvation and the human condition.

❸ Read Luke 1:29-38. A tradition about Mary, long honored in Church history but rightly held as an open question among confessional Lutherans, is the that she was *Semper Virgo*, meaning "ever virgin."

Let us explore this step by step:

Step 1: What is *Semper Virgo*?

Semper Virgo is Latin for "always virgin." It refers to the belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ.

1. Before Birth (*virginitas ante partum*)

Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:34–35). This is a clear article of faith, as confessed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

2. During Birth (*virginitas in partu*)

Some in the early church taught that Jesus' birth was miraculous and did not violate Mary's virginity—like light passing through glass. Though beautiful, this is not explicitly taught in Scripture.

3. After Birth (*virginitas post partum*)

This is the most debated point. Some believe Mary remained a virgin her entire life. Others interpret verses such as Matthew 13:55-56, Mark 6:3, Luke 8:19-21, and John 2:12 & 7:5, where it is mentioned that Jesus had brothers and sisters, understanding "brothers and sisters" of Jesus to mean cousins or kin.

✞ What does Scripture say? And what would be the motivation for teaching *Semper Virgo* concerning Mary? To elevate Mary. Such teachings do little to add to the glory of Christ.

What does the Bible say: Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus (Matthew 1:25 and Luke 1:26–27). And this use of "virgin" is clearly more than just the meaning "pure". It implies that Mary's hymen was not broken. She had never had sex. However, the bible in no way mentions whether she remained a virgin after Jesus' birth. In fact, Matthew 1:25 implies the opposite. The bible states that she "gave birth" and that implies the normal and natural way, so without a clear statement otherwise, we would assume that Jesus came through the vaginal canal of Mary, unless Joseph was skilled enough to perform a cesarian section—in a stable, no less!

The fact that all four gospels explicitly state that Jesus had "brothers" and "sisters" who were with his mother, makes it hard to swallow that the Greek term *adelphoi* here means extended family.

In the end, this seems more like an attempt to elevate Mary that to glorify Jesus. While the Lutheran confessions do at times seem to affirm the idea, they do not teach it as doctrine but rather simply the idea is implied, probably because the writers and all early Lutherans came out of the medieval Roman church that elevated Mary. To believe in Semper Virgo or Jesus' miraculous birth is not wrong. It's an open question since Scripture does not say precisely one way or the other. But Lutherans have always expressly denied the immaculate conception of Mary for clear doctrinal reasons.

We should honor Mary, but in the normal sense of the word. She was an incredible example of faith and played an special role in God's salvation plan. She is even more to be honored since she rightly deserves the title "Mother of God." How extraordinary! But the designation "theotokos" is more about the extraordinariness of Christ's coming into this world—becoming just like any other baby—rather than about about anything extraordinary concerning Mary. It does not make her anything more than a sinful human being blessed to be used by God for His special purposes, just as Abraham was, Moses, or King David.

❹ What captivating words does Gabriel share to reveal the true identity of this miraculous child to Mary—and to us?

1:31: "Jesus" – "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh saves".

1:32: "great" and "Son of the Most High" (Note that John the Baptist is "great before the Lord" (1:15) but Jesus "great, the Son of the Most High. [step-parallelism].).

1:33: "King".

1:35: "the holy one", "the Son of God"

❺ Gabriel joyfully unveils the awe-inspiring mystery of the INCARNATION! The Holy Spirit will descend upon Mary, and in that miraculous moment, God takes on human form within her. But how does this incredible event unfold? Martin Luther suggested that she conceived Jesus through her ear—what does he mean by that and what might that signify for us? Furthermore, how does Mary's receiving Jesus' into her own flesh and blood echo the transformative experience of Holy Communion, and what lessons does it impart to our understanding of this sacred gift? Technically and literally it's a mystery. But Luther's suggestion is most appealing because it makes very literal the results of faith and the power of God's word to bring forth new life. Luther's explanation is simple: Mary heard the word of God and believed it. And so it happened just as she believed. Because God's word always does what it says.

In Holy Communion, Christ is made present not in a woman's womb, but in bread and wine. But the same basic principals apply. To utterly reject that Christ can be present in mere bread or wine, equally calls into question how God can be present in a uterus as a flesh and blood baby. We simply trust what the word promises. And as it is with any sacrament or sacramental action: it's for the purpose of salvation.

6. Look at verse 34. How is Mary's question different from Zechariah's question in 1:18? Why is she commended while Zechariah was punished with silence?
Mary's question is merely a question about procedure. After all, she (nor anyone else) had ever heard of or experienced a virgin birth. Zechariah on the other hand, asks "how will I know this" which is a question more about credibility. In other word, he seems to ask, "How can God accomplish this, since Elizabeth was so old." But Zechariah, if nothing else had a very important OT precident to look back on—like Sarah.

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