2021 Christmas Message (II)

**Where does the Obedience come?**

Luke 1:26-38

Key Verse: 1:38

*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.*

 Two weeks ago, by the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we learned that God is the only One we can trust because He is unchangingly faithful, not to forget His promise of thousands of years ago, and we must go through His affectionate disciplines, by which God shepherds us into His deeper love. Today, we are going to meditate together how the Lord God led two people, Mary and Joseph, and how he worked out the Salvation, bringing about a great victory. My today’s the title is “Where does the obedience come?” Simple, but crucial question to determine our whole lives.

**Part I. From the Fall to the victory.**

 Let’s read vs 26. In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. In the Luke’s gospel, the writer structurally apposes, puts side by side John the Baptist’s story and Jesus’, and makes John’s story faded out, which enables us to naturally focus upon Jesus. That exactly corresponds to God’s will for John the Baptist’s life as a forerunner of the Messiah.

Unlike John’s hometown, Beth Hakkerem, a beautiful city, which was mentioned a few times in the OT, the “Nazareth”, a small village with about 400 residents, surrounded by the mountains, and 55 miles away from Jerusalem, does not appear at all in the OT. Some scholars say Nazareth is hidden in the Isaiah 11:1, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” because the name of Nazareth means a branch. However, one thing is clear that nobody in Israel paid attention to this small town, and actually even contempted as we can see Nathanael’s remark, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (Jn 1:46). In other words, “Nazareth” was another name of insignificance, disregard, and disrespect. However, Mathew says Jesus would be called a Nazarene (Mt 2:23), which was the name of contempt. This was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Let’s read Isaiah 53:2. “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” As John’s gospel says He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (Jn 1:11).

Let’s see vs 27. to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. Some believe Mary must have been a woman of righteousness before God, and must have had a very special faith in God. But the bible does not mention her faith or righteousness before God at all, which implies Mary was a quite ordinary girl we can see every day. All the bible says about Mary is that she was a virgin pledged to be married to Joseph. The virginity is the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” But why did not God choose a more polished and sophisticated girl? 1Co may show the answer; He chose Mary because she was weak and low, so that no one may boast before him (1Co 1:27-28).

And Mary’s pregnancy is also to fulfill God’s promise in Genesis that Messiah will come as a woman’s offspring (Gen 3:15). Then, why does the Messiah come as a woman’s offspring? The Fall, the original sin, came to us through the woman, Eve and her disobedience. She was deceived by the crafty serpent and even induced Adam also to disobey God. God turns this tide of sin and death initiated by the woman’s disobedience, to the victory by the woman, Mary’s obedience. When Mary heard that she would conceive and give birth to a son, called Jesus, the Son of the Most High, in vs 34, she asked Gabriel, “How will this be since I am a virgin.” This question sounds very similar to what Zechariah asked the angel “How can I be sure of this?” But after we scrutinize two questions by comparison, we could find out that their questions were completely distinct. Whereas Zechariah cast a skeptical and doubtful question by saying how “CAN” I be sure of this, Mary showed an accepting approach, simply wondering the process and manner by asking how “WILL” this be. To rephrase it, when questioning, Mary already began to accept Gabriel’s annunciation. After Gabriel’s inspiring explanation and encouragement by the verse 35 to 37, Mary shows her complete commitment and obedience to God, confessing “May your word to me be fulfilled.”

We note that Eve was the wife of Adam. Likewise, Mary was the wife of Joseph, the descendant of David. For being pledged to be married to a man was legally binding same as marriage except that they come together after a year. That is why Mathew’s gospel calls Joseph as Mary’s husband even before the marriage (Mt 1:19, 24). When Joseph, a faithful man to the law, was considering divorcing quietly, an angel of the Lord told him not to be afraid to take Mary because she conceived from the Holy Spirit. Right after this dream, Joseph obeyed God by doing what the angel had commanded and took Mary home as his wife. While Adam induced by Eve, fell into the disobedience and completed the Fall, the original sin, Joseph helped Mary’s obedience by accepting her as a wife according to His will. But the obedience to the Salvation was not completed yet.

Let us read vs 31 to 33. “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” Jesus, who is in very nature God, made himself nothing and took the form of servant, and obeyed unto the death on the cross (Phil 2:6-8). By way of the co-workers, Mary and Joseph, the obedience was completed by Jesus’ death on the cross which opened the narrow way to the Salvation promised by God thousands of years ago. May God help us to walk this narrow way leading to life that Jesus’ precious blood opened.

**Part II. The way to obey God.**

 Let’s read verse 38. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. When I read today’s passage, one simple question always comes to my mind; how could Mary commit herself thoroughly to God’s will? When the angel visited her, Mary might be spending the happiest days in her life. She was full of hope to get married with Joseph, and have a loving family. What a beautiful picture it was! But abruptly the angel appeared and shattered her dreams to pieces, declaring that she would conceive the Messiah through the Holy Spirit. If she had a baby, it would be regarded as an adultery, and apart from the marriage, she would be stoned to death.

 When Mary asked a question in vs 34, facing Gabriel’s annunciation, she might hesitate, although she maintained the accepting attitude. But after vs 35-37, she embraced God’s will humbly and superbly. Let me read again vs 38. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” How beautiful Mary’s confession was! Now, she admitted thoroughly God’s sovereignty over her life deeply in her heart so that she could obey God’s will. What happened to her during this short moment? The secret seems to be hidden. The vs 35-37 were remarkably well-organized to encourage and secure Mary firmly on the faith. However, something vital seems to be missing. What is that?

 I think the key lies in vs 38a again, “May **your word to me** be fulfilled.” Mary could accept God’s will not because the angel’s answer was persuasive or well-organized, but because it was God’s living word to her. It was the Rhema to her. As we know, in the NT, God’s word can be interpreted to two in Greek; Logos and Rhema. To put it simple, Logos is the bible, and Rhema is God’s specific, and individual speaking to me. Sometimes the Rhema is life-changing because it touches us so deeply and shakes our whole universe. The word in vs 38 is the Rhema. When Gabriel answered her question, this Rhema came to Mary and she was able to accept God’s sovereignty. I believe all of us experienced this life-changing Rhema. For the bible says, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” (Ro 10:17), and here the word signifies Rhema. Without Rhema, we cannot be here to worship God.

 One day in 2014, I received a phone call from my wife, Grace. Her voice was shaky, saying that our younger daughter in her womb had physical challenges. I went back to her right away, and we walked together. I still remember the alley ways we walked, the café we had some drinks, and the atmosphere surrounded us that day. Every people looked like peaceful and happy. Why me? Why me? Distressing a few weeks passed by. I was inclining to a humanly choice. One morning in the office, a thought floated into my mind that “I have no authority over her life. For God is the only source of every life. I am a just trustee, a foster of God’s daughter.” Obviously, this though did not come from my mind because I’ve never thought in that way. And it exactly accorded with the bible. I accepted God’s authority alone over the life, and the anguish was resolved.

I believe the thought I encountered that morning, was the same voice as Mary heard from the angel in vs 38. God’s word is life-saving and sometimes life-determining. May we recognize His living voice which enables us to save the lost souls, and help us to discern and follow His voice faithfully.

**Part III. And life goes on**

 Let’s read vs 32-33. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” What an exciting and fantastic declaration! Mary’s baby would be a Son of God, and his kingdom would never end. However, Mary’s superb obedience to God did not promise any rosy happiness. On the contrary, as Simeon prophesied (Lk 2:35), she must go through the heartbreaking suffering to witness Jesus to be crucified without a sin.

 The obedience to God’s will does not guarantee any secure life as shown in the bible. As pastor David often says, life is tough, and the series of problems. How can we endure this challenging life?

One day, my younger daughter posed me the following quiz: “*I shine in the dark. I am there, but cannot be seen. To be with me costs you nothing. But to be without me costs you everything. Who am I?*” The answer is “hope.” Without a hope, we cannot pass through this tough life. Then, where can we find the hope? Yes, Jesus Christ who rose again from the dead, whereby crushed the darkness. When Mary met Jesus who resurrected, her sorrow changed into joy and hope for the eternal life. As the book of Hebrews says, this hope is an anchor for our soul, firm and secure (Heb 6:19). Only with this hope given by Jesus’ resurrection, we could bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit; joy, peace, patience and thanksgiving. Let us pray.