

CHRISTMAS FAITH
CHRISTMAS, 2008 pt. 1

Tom was born the son of a shop owner in Glasgow, Scotland, so you could perhaps say that he was steered in the direction of retail merchandizing from his earliest days. No one, then, was surprised when Tom opened his own shop on his 21st birthday- a small grocery store on Stobcross St. in Glasgow. What did surprise people was the manner in which Tom advertized and sold his products. You see, Tom had visited our country in 1865 at the age of 15, and he had been impressed with American merchandizing procedures. Tom had become convinced that such promotion would also work in Scotland, so he determined to use them even though they were foreign to his culture.

That first Christmas, Tom caused a real stir around Glasgow. He came up with the idea of having a Christmas cheese. He advertized it as the largest cheese in the world. Tom claimed that it took 200 dairy workers 6 days to make this cheese from the milk of 800 cows. Perhaps it was understandable that the conservative citizens of Glasgow were very skeptical about Tom's world-class cheese. In fact, many didn't believe Tom at all. They just out and out called him a liar. But there was still enough curiosity to bring hundreds to the docks when the steamer bearing Tom's cheese arrived in Scotland. And there it was- just like Tom said it would be- the world's largest cheese. Spectators cheered as it was transported to Tom's store. But Tom wasn't finished yet. He squeezed in gold coins throughout the cheese- an imitation of the traditional sixpence in the Christmas pudding. When that cheese was sliced up on Christmas Eve and put up for sale, the city of Glasgow had to create a special squad of policemen to control the mob at Tom's grocery store. And merchandizing was never the same in Great Britain again. For having now seen his monster cheese, the people believed. So next year when Tom advertised another giant cheese, there were no more doubts. And enormous cheeses became a Christmas tradition at Tom's grocery store. Whenever Tom would advertise another unique product, instead of calling him crazy behind his back, people would line up at his store to see what Tom was cooking up next.

Today, nobody remembers Tom's Christmas cheese tradition. For Tom had another idea that would eventually overshadow the cheese. This was an idea much closer to the hearts of the Scottish people. Because of this novel idea, you all remember Tom's name. Tom was the first merchant to put tea in little bags. Sir Thomas Johnstone Lipton- the man who impressed those doubting Thomas's of Glasgow with his world record cheese was also the man who invented the first tea bag.

It is naturally difficult for people to believe something that they haven't personally experienced. A young merchant making outlandish claims would naturally bring skeptical remarks. But as that merchant

fulfilled claim after claim, his credibility grew to the place where people began to expect his claims to come true. "How gullible does Lipton think we can be?" eventually turned to "What is Sir Thomas Lipton going to do next?" in the city of Glasgow.

We couldn't live on this earth without a measure of faith. Every claim offered demands our belief or doubt. Every promise made invites us to trust or question. And most often, consistency of believing and trusting comes only as we gain confidence in one making the claims.

The Bible speaks of 3 abiding, foundational virtues. They are faith, hope and love. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 13:13- "And now these 3 remain: faith, hope and love." 3 indispensable, cardinal virtues.

It shouldn't surprise us to see each of these virtues interwoven throughout the Christmas message. The Christmas story requires faith. The Christmas story gives us hope. And the Christmas story reveals to us love. During these 3 weeks before Christmas, we would like to see the faith, hope and love of Christmas that God reveals to us in his word.

This morning, we are going to see Christmas faith as we look together at the account that Dr. Luke gives in the 1st chapter of his gospel. We must begin with the faith of Christmas, for if we don't believe God's Christmas message to us, we will also miss the hope and love of Christmas as well.

The Christmas story requires faith of us. It required faith of Mary. Her initial response to the angelic message was a response of doubt. "How will this be?" 1:34. How is it possible that you are telling me the truth? The message that you are giving seems impossible. How can it be true? But Mary came to the place of believing the angelic announcement. She finally said, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." 1:38. So the Christmas message became meaningful to Mary as she accepted and believed it.

So it is in each of our lives. Many are willing to say that the Christmas story is a nice legend, a heart-warming myth. But these people are not personally affected by the historical events that took place during that first Christmas season. Their lives are not changed by the Christmas story. Only those who accept God's revelation as true and live according to their beliefs truly know the significance of Christmas.

What was it that Mary found hard to believe? What was it about the angel's announcement that called for faith as a response on her part? There are many more than we could mention, but I would invite you to look with me at 3 facets of Luke's account that require the response of faith.

1. The first facet is found in verses 26 and 27. "In the 6th month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary."

Now it is not a daily occurrence to have an angel appear with a message from God. And especially in

the days in which Mary was living, divine intervention into human life was a very rare occurrence. Mary lived right at the end of the period that we call the 400 silent years. We call them silent years because the O.T. canon had been completed some 400 years before Mary lived concluding with the writing of the prophet Malachi. Before Malachi for almost 1,000 years, it had been a regular occurrence for God to communicate with his people. Scriptures were written, prophets received words from God, dreams and visions were not that unusual. But then came the 400 silent years. There were no Scriptures inspired from God. Dreams and visions were rare. We see this time period today looking back with perspective as preparatory for the coming of the Messiah. But in Mary's day, this was just a time of God's silence. The Roman Empire was cruelly enslaving God's promised land and God's people and God didn't seem to care. He was silent in the heavens.

Then, all of a sudden one day, an angel named Gabriel appeared to a young teenager named Mary with a message from God. "Could this really be an angel? Or might I be having an hallucination, a dream?" Mary must have thought. Is this really a message from God himself?

The Christmas story for Mary began with her accepting the angelic being and the message that he was bringing. This required a measure of faith on her part for angelic appearances were not part of routine, daily living.

2. But it was not only the appearance but the message given by the angel that also required a response of faith from Mary. The angel told Mary that she was going to have a child. "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." vs. 30.

Now this news must have brought many questions into Mary's mind. And she answers Gabriel, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Mary immediately realized that the message that the angel was giving to her was physically impossible. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, but she had never engaged in sexual relations with Joseph or with any other man. It was physically impossible for her to be pregnant with child. This news would require even more faith for Mary, for while she could see and hear the angel Gabriel, the revelation that she was with child she knew to be a total impossibility from a natural standpoint.

Now we realize today the absolute necessity of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. And because there is some misunderstanding concerning the nature of it, let me just clearly state that the virgin birth of Jesus means more than Mary just being a virgin before Jesus was conceived within her. The virgin birth of Jesus means that Mary remained a virgin having no sexual relations with any man until after Jesus was physically born. Matthew brings this out most clearly when he says that "Joseph had no union with Mary until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." Matt. 1:25. What occurred in Mary's giving birth to

Jesus was a total first in human history- a baby being born without a human father.

Now, again, from our perspective today, and from the theology that is developed in the Bible, we can see the necessity of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.

*If Jesus Christ were to be different from any other human being, he would have to have some kind of unique birth. Biologically, each type of life produces after its own kind. The various natures of both parents unite in their offspring. Now Mary and Joseph would have children after Jesus was born. The Bible mentions James, Joses, Judas, Simeon as well as some sisters that Joseph and Mary had in their family. If Jesus were to be different from his brothers and sisters in his family, he would have to have a unique kind of birth.

*The virgin birth is also indispensable to the sinless nature of Jesus Christ. The Bible indicates that we receive a sinful nature from our parents- specifically from our fathers. Romans 5 continuously makes reference to the fact that sin entered the human race thru the sin of Adam, and the implication throughout the Scriptures is that the sinful nature continues to be passed from person to person thru the father's nature. For Jesus to be qualified to bear the sins of the world, he would first of all have to be the sinless lamb of God. Obviously, if Christ was a sinful person himself, his concern would be to provide payment for his own sins. He could not be concerned with the sins of others. The only way for a person to be born without a sinful nature would be for him to somehow be born without a human father- a physical impossibility. But an absolute necessity if God's purposes were to be accomplished. So then, the virgin birth was absolutely necessary for the redemptive plans of God to be fulfilled. Christ needed to be born of the virgin Mary so that he could be able to provide a sinless sacrifice.

*So then, we can see the biological necessity of Christ being born different from other human beings. If a unique God-man were to enter the human race, we would not expect him to be born just like every other human being. And we can see the necessity of the virgin birth in God's redemptive purposes- for to fulfill his purpose, Jesus had to be the sinless lamb of God in order to be able to pay for the sins of the world.

But understanding the whole picture as we can today from our perspective doesn't at all minimize the shock that this news must have been to Mary. In those moments when the angel was communicating to her, she couldn't have possibly put all the pieces of this puzzle together. She would have simply been overwhelmed with the impossibility of it all. How could she as a virgin bear a child? It was not physically possible. So then, the angel's message required of Mary the response of faith. For the angel answered Mary's doubts with the assurance that "nothing is impossible with God." 1:37. When Mary believed that truth- that indeed nothing was impossible with God, that God was able to perform that which was physically impossible- when she responded in faith to the angelic announcement, then she began to realize the true joy

and love of Christmas which would be later revealed in her song of Praise to the Lord found in 1:46-55.

3. But there is yet a third facet of Gabriel's message which required faith on the part of Mary. The angel told Mary that God was going to be born in human form, and that she was going to have that child. The child which she would bear would be the very son of God himself.

"But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end.'" 1:30-33.

Now in order to realize the impact that this message must have had upon Mary, that she would be the mother of the son of the most High, that she would bear the child of God himself, we must remind ourselves of the typical Jewish view of God. If you were to ask the average Jewish person of Mary's day his concept of God, you would receive a much different answer than you might hear from your average American today. Today, the predominant characteristic of God that people think about is His love. God is love- and he has demonstrated his love for us in sending his one and only son to pay for our sins. But we must remember that these truths were revealed after Mary's time. The fact that God is love was written by the Apostle John almost a century after Mary talked with Gabriel. The example of God's love in Christ had not yet been revealed for Christ hadn't yet been born.

No, the predominant attribute of God which was emphasized by the Jewish people was his austere holiness. They thought of the God who had destroyed the earth by a flood because of the wickedness found in the days of Noah. They remembered and commonly spoke of the God who reigned down fire and brimstone from heaven to consume the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their immorality. They envisioned the God who had given the righteous laws on tablets of stone from Mt. Sinai, that God who was so fearful to the people in the lightning and thunder of his appearance that they begged to not have to go near the mountain. Let Moses go up- but please don't make us go and have to face God ourselves. Theirs was the God who had driven out the Canaanites and commanded their deaths because of their evil. Their concept of God continued to be reinforced by their remembrance of their own exile into slavery due to their own disobedience to God's perfect standards and their continued life of bondage under the Roman oppression that they were even then suffering. If you would have spoken to the average Jewish person in Mary's day as to her concept of God, she would have probably not spoken of love or tenderness or mercy. She would have probably used words like holiness and righteousness and power and might. Mary did not have the benefit of the complete revelation of God that we have today.

The thought of having the child of the most high God must have been a terrifying one for Mary. What

would God's son be like? How could one be a mother to such a powerful being? And how could this even be? How was it possible for God to become like man? How could the one of whom King Solomon said that the great temple could not contain him be confined to a mere human body? How could the creator and sustainer of the universe become like a tiny, helpless baby? We can only begin to imagine the questions that raced thru Mary's mind as Gabriel was delivering his angelic message to her.

But amazingly Mary responded in faith. She accepted and believed the message that Gabriel was giving to her. She believed that Gabriel was really an angel from God, and that he was bringing a divine revelation to her. She accepted the fact that God could make her to have a child as a virgin, without the involvement of a human father. She had the faith to believe that she could actually bear the son of the most high God himself. She trusted Gabriel's words to be true- that truly nothing is impossible with God. She responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" vs. 38. And it was at that time, as Mary responded in faith, that she began to realize experientially the true Christmas story.

"But wait a minute!" you might be thinking. How can you say that Mary experienced the Christmas message as she responded in faith? The tenses of the verbs that are used in this passage are very important. Gabriel said to Mary in verse 31- "you will be with child" - literally you will conceive in your womb. Gabriel did not come to announce to Mary something that had already occurred, he rather came to announce what God's will and plan for her life was in the future. And Mary then experienced that plan as she responded in faith to the message from God.

The Christmas story is not a secret. Almost everyone in our nation knows something about it. We hear the Christmas story many times during this season of the year, and see it portrayed in manger scenes throughout our land. In spite of the enemy's attempts to distort the message, the true Christmas story is being told throughout our land. But there are many in our nation who are not experiencing the hope, joy and love of Christmas because they are not responding in faith to God's message.

They scoff at the possibility of angelic appearances- in fact they deny any possibility of angelic beings as not having been scientifically verified. They laugh at the virgin birth as being biologically impossible. "God becoming a man so that he might redeem his human race is just too much for me to believe," they say. So they might accept the Christmas story as a nice legend- in the same category as Santa Clause- but they really don't believe it to be true.

Those who fail to respond to God's message in faith will never really experience the reality of the Christmas story. Because our relationship with God begins with faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God," the Scriptures say. God has revealed his message to us- it is as clear and direct as Gabriel's announcement to Mary. In a miraculous manner, God enabled the Virgin Mary to bear the son of God

himself. God's purpose was for Jesus Christ to live a sinless life and bear the sins of the human race in his atoning death upon the cross of Calvary. God says to us that nothing is impossible with him. And he asks us to believe his word- to respond to him in faith. And he promises that such a response on our part will be rewarded with a personal relationship with him.

Have you really accepted the Christmas story as truth from God? Do you have Christmas faith?