

Luke 1:26–38

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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John the Baptist has had the last couple of Sundays, and there's an awful lot of "who" to his story. He is quite the character, the forerunner, dressed up in all the gear of a prophet. His appearance is striking, and we get a sense of his personality from his proclamation, I suppose. But his identity is linked up with Jesus in such a direct way that, as in that great Isenheim altarpiece, his index finger is twice as long as a normal finger, way beyond proportion to his hand. He is the one who points away, and he points to what is coming. What is coming is the kingdom of God, and he disappears into that message, so that as he comes preaching the coming of the kingdom of God, the immediate question is: What is this? What's he talking about? What is coming? It is coming in the preached word and the administered sacrament. It is coming at the end. It is the reign of God, God taking hold of our hearts in faith.

But with this Sunday's texts we are parked right at the edge of the Christmas season, in Advent 4, and the "who" really takes over. To steal a line from Dr. Seuss, we are going right to the center of Whoville here, because the "who" is Christ Jesus, and in these texts we are now going to be introduced to him.

It starts with David in 2 Samuel. David is the ruddy-cheeked lad who has become the great king, who was taken from tending sheep and who now, in his success, thinks that since he has a house, he ought to build one for God too. This is just a great story. For all his effort, or rather despite his effort, in contradiction to it, he is brought to what really matters: the promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which he will carry on and which in his son will be spread on a wider basis. So we get the promise stated in 2 Samuel, and that promise takes over in Psalm 89 as well. The steadfast love of God overflows in both time and space, God reaching out past all the normal boundaries to bless, to give, to pour out a red-hot oven full of love, overflowing, giving himself completely.

In Romans 16, God himself steps forward. It is a really odd choice of text, but we know what's going on. That love has been embodied, revealed, and disclosed in Christ Jesus, and now it comes to us through the prophetic word, and it's as though the apostle Paul is offering the

good Lord a toast. It's him. Who is the "who"? He is the one. God is the one who is now bringing in the new creation.

And then we come to one of the great texts of the whole church year, the gospel, and we find young Mary, this beautiful woman who is still a girl, still a woman-child, so to speak. She is maybe fourteen or fifteen years old, by the standards of the time just becoming a woman, not quite yet. She is just of marriageable age, and in fact arrangements have been made with Joseph, but she has not yet entered into the vocation of a woman as it was understood in those times. And yet she is a woman of faith. So the story here is about her son, the son whom as yet she does not know. But of course she steals the show, and so we are going to get acquainted once again with beloved Mary, this great woman who is the first preacher of the gospel and one of the great preachers in the history of the faith. The good Lord has a habit with barren women; he loves them. He rejoices in blessing, and so Elizabeth and Mary are going to come to the center of the narrative.

So we'll do what we usually do: a quick tour through the three supporting texts, and then I'll try to spend the rest of the time on the gospel, this dearly beloved story of the Annunciation.

God Builds David a House: 2 Samuel 7

First of all, 2 Samuel 7:1–11. I have spent all my life reading Scripture, as most pastors do, I hope, or as I think we should anyway, and a couple of the people I have come to love dearly in all that reading are around this text. One of them, Samuel, is among my most beloved favorites. You can never learn enough from Samuel. And right now the second book named for Samuel is telling the story of another one, Nathan, one of the wise, cagey old pastors of all Scripture, a court chaplain who knew a thing or two about handling power, and who is once more in conversation with David. You just know this is going to be good. And of course it's more than good; it's just great.

David has his hands behind his head, and he is leaning back thinking of everything that has gone before, and he has decided that he is going to build God a house. I remember when Peter got an idea about building a house. It was so stupid that even the Holy Spirit intervened. When the Holy Spirit apologizes for you and says, "Peter didn't know what he was saying," it's done.

Well, here we go. Now David has the idea. And of course you know what this is: the human immortality project, if you ever saw it in your whole life. "I'm going to build him a house."

Nice. And the good Lord breaks in right at that point: “So you’re going to build me a house, are you?” This is, of course, what the human spirit is always after. The original temptation is to become as God, to be wise, to know good from evil, and so to draw plans and embark on structures and systems and programs and all the rest of it that will build God a permanent dwelling: preferably out back, where he won’t disturb us or the neighbors, but close enough to have him handy if we need him. There we go.

“So you’re going to build me a house? Did I ever ask you or anybody else to build me a house? Did I ever bother any of the prophets with this idea? Give me a break.” God breaks into David’s illusion with direct words of repudiation: “You will not build me a house. I will build you a house.” That’s the way it works. He is not going to build a structure. He is going to build a household of faith, a community gathered around his work and sustained by his grace. He is going to provide a house that will last forever.

When I was thinking about this text, I was reminded of an adventure I had a couple of years ago. I have a wonderful friend named Don Cornell, an old retired pastor out in the Northwest, who took me under his wing when I was younger. He runs tours to Turkey, and Carolyn and I went with him a couple of years ago; my pastor is going with him this spring. He took us to the town of Iznik, the old town of Nicaea, to see where the Nicene Creed had been finally edited. It was a large structure right at the edge of the lake, and as things have gone, the lake has risen and the building has fallen. The footings and some of the ruins are right in the lake, at the edge. So the little troop of us on the tour walked out on the stones and stood on the ruins of the building where the Nicene Creed was given its final form, and together we confessed our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. It was just fabulous. The building is gone, the town is gone, and the faith that once animated that part of the world is gone, but the faith that drives everything was still there, right on our lips as we confessed. It could not possibly have been better. That’s the house he builds: the household of faith.

Steadfast Love: Psalm 89

Psalm 89 sets out this promise in a hymn of praise to the love of God. You know the Hebrew word here: *hesed*, which is almost impossible to translate. It is the abiding, sustaining, unqualifiedly gracious, steadfast love of the Lord, just spilling over, full of grace. This is God blessing without restraint, beyond any kind of restraint, giving himself wholly, as Luther says, and withholding nothing.

This abiding love is not a policy. It is not an attribute. It is as specific and concrete as the people of Israel. “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” as William Norman Ewer wrote. It is a word so specific that it can only fit a particular person or people clothed in this love. It is attached to a specific promise. It is attached to the covenant.

Now, I always get nervous around that word, as some of you who were in class with me probably remember. Nowadays we almost invariably think of covenants as contracts; it is, of course, a synonym for “contract.” One of my great old teachers, Dr. Bruce, went back into the Hebrew to establish it as a suzerainty treaty, a treaty between unequals, where the one is far stronger and the other much weaker. But even that doesn’t quite rescue it. When you interpret the word “covenant” here, it is clear that it is completely one-sided. God is the actor; God sustains it. There are, of course, passages in the Old Testament that want to make the covenant conditional on our obedience. But that interpretation has been reviewed decisively by Christ Jesus, and by this psalm, which clearly knows better. The love of God, as Luther wrote, does not find but creates what is pleasing to it. It doesn’t go looking for something that already exists; it creates what it desires. And so the *hesed* of God, the steadfast love of God, creates.

We can see a whole list of its dimensions in the verses before verse 19, which are not officially part of this reading, but I’m going to go into that part of the text anyway. The love is made specific: “The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it — you have founded them. The north and the south — you created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand. ... Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Happy are the people ...” And so on. It just spills. This love specifically reaches out and embraces. It strengthens, it creates anew, it brings new dimensions of life. So we can’t reduce it to an attitude or an attribute. We see it dimensionally.

A Toast to God: Romans 16

Romans 16:25–27 is a really strange choice of text, and I’ve been enjoying playing with it. It is the benediction to the book of Romans: one long sentence, though not actually a complete sentence. It is more like a toast, and that’s what is unusual. When you toast somebody, you hold up your glass and say, “To you, my friend.” It’s as though Paul is drinking to the good Lord at the end of this great letter, celebrating. And there’s the “who” again: he is pointing to God and to some of God’s great characteristics.

God has been a mystery and remains a mystery. There is always something of God that we don't know, something of the hidden God that doesn't come out, that isn't preached. As Steve Paulson says, sometimes we have to hold the preached God in front of the unpreached God and remind the unpreached God to mind his manners. But in the preached God, God has come out into the light. Insofar as we know him in Christ Jesus, through Christ Jesus, he has been disclosed to us. The mystery has been opened, and through the prophetic word that promise has been extended to the Gentiles. In Christ, and through Scripture, the prophetic word, the mystery has now been opened.

There is something yet that remains mysterious. We know the promise; we don't know a lot more than that. We are in the mystery. One of my dear uncles is lying near death down in Wisconsin, and I just got a wonderful letter from his wife, my dear auntie, who writes that he is comfortable and that they are waiting now to learn what the will of God is. What we know for sure about the will of God is in Christ Jesus. We know the promise made in the covenant, made in Christ Jesus in an unqualified way. So we wait in eager longing. This is the joy of it: in the love of God, he has tipped his hand. He has shown us what is at stake and what is at work for us.

The Annunciation: Luke 1

But now we come to this great gospel text. There are two different "who"s involved here. Generally speaking, Christ Jesus is the subject of Scripture. He is the one who has all the verbs. He is the one in the limelight, the one acting, the one at work, and he shares the limelight reluctantly. Everybody else appears in the story in passing. He takes over pretty quickly, and he is the one who is moving, shaping, doing, accomplishing, finishing the whole book. And yet when his mother is around, she can get by with something. He won't share the limelight very often, but when Mom is there, it's a different story. So we have this lovely text that is so much fun you could never run out of it.

First of all, we should look at him standing right in the center, because he has been dressed in titles in this story. Luke is identifying the "who." He is telling us who this one is, who is God's love on two feet, God revealing himself. And so we get a whole series of christological titles. Once, when I was a young pastor serving my first call, my father-in-law, a New Testament professor, came out for the birth of our first son. He preached for me one Sunday, on this text, and he went through these titles one by one. It's really interesting how all these titles have been gathered into the story, so that Jesus is identified for us.

First of all, his name will be Jesus. In the Aramaic you can take that as a play on the words “he will save.” So this is an identity. He has the name Jesus, the name by which he can be called upon, which identifies him as one person among others. But it is also a calling. It is his identity, and it is also his job: he will save. So we know from the beginning that the *hesed* of God, the love of God, is now becoming as specific as it always is. It is embodied in the flesh and blood of a man who will save, who will save his people from their sins.

With the name identified, some other titles start to fall into place. “He will be called the Son of the Most High.” I know, of course, and I’ve heard plenty of talk about the problem of male gender, but I really think it’s beside the point. There are two choices, male or female; you can’t find anything in between unless you go across to the sideshow. Jesus is the Son of the Most High. He is a male, and so the male pronoun is used, but it is used not for purposes of gender exclusiveness but to point to the love that is at work here. He is Son of the Most High: that is, in him the Most High, the one whose name must always be protected, has expressed himself. He has come out into the open. We can see him here. He is on view to us here. He is Son of the Most High in the sense that he is God’s self-expression, God becoming accessible to us so that we can identify him specifically.

Here’s another one: “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” We will hear him called the Son of David. Interestingly, that name is not used in this particular text, but it is clearly implied. He is the Son of David, the one God promised in the text from Samuel, the one spoken of in Psalm 89, the one whose kingdom will be and remain forever. He is the “who” at the center: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord.”

And because he is who he is, because this is God, there is Elizabeth. In ancient times barrenness was a real curse, and you can see the vestiges of it: the helplessness, the despondency, the despair, the sorrow. We learn quickly enough that when you’re dealing with barrenness, the good Lord is at work in the story. Old Elizabeth, you can just see her looking at Zechariah and saying, “I never thought you’d do this to me.” Poor thing; you’d think he could have had a little mercy on her at her age. But of course it is John the Baptist who is kicking her, and so it’s way too much fun. Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to be going to PTA meetings now. They are the proud parents of a young boy who could be a real screamer, I’ll have to say.

Mary Believed

And then Mary. Luther zeroed right in on Mary, and this is so much fun. When he preached on this text once, he said there are three miracles in the story. The first is that God should become a man. The second is that he should be born of a virgin. And the third is that Mary believed it. The third miracle is by far the greatest, and you can just see it all over the text.

Here is this young woman, fourteen, fifteen, maybe sixteen. It's not like nowadays, when young girls mature so much more rapidly. She has just come to be of childbearing age, and here she is, and an angel comes to visit her. "She was much perplexed," and you can't fault her for that; you at least owe her that. Good night, poor thing. She has been given this vocation without any choice of her own. And the angel Gabriel comes and says, "Do not be afraid." Why shouldn't she be? I'd be scared to death. "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."

I bet she didn't think of this as favor when she lost him, when they were down at the temple and he was twelve years old, wandering around running seminars with the priests. I bet she thought, "I thought this was going to be fun, and look what it turned out to be. I've got this precocious kid I have no control over. Good night, give me a chance." "He will be great." Of course he was great. And he will save his people. "He will be called the Son of the Most High."

So she gets the announcement, and then she asks the question she should ask. You can get in trouble doing that, as Zechariah learned. He started asking how this was going to happen with beautiful Elizabeth, whom he dearly loved: "This hasn't worked all our lives. How is it going to work now?" The good Lord got ticked off and made him mute. But Mary gets away with it. She must have asked quite politely, I suppose. "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" She could have said, "Well, how in the world is this going to happen, you dummy?" But she says, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She has not known a man. How is she going to conceive in this way? That's a legitimate question.

The angel answers: the Holy Spirit will take care of this; don't worry about it. Then he makes the announcement about Elizabeth. And then Mary says the miraculous words of this text. You could preach on the titles for a good hour at least, but these words you can meditate on, and give thanks to Mary for them. Here she has come full-grown as a preacher, fourteen or

fifteen, maybe sixteen, but already a preacher of the gospel: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Perfect. She could not have said anything better.

Of course, we have some thickheaded historical critics who will run around asking biological questions and making up jokes and all the rest of it, and there will be plenty who say, “Well, Luke just made this up.” But I’ll tell you what I think. I think Mary said what she needed to say. Mary said what the Holy Spirit gave her to say. And when she sings the Magnificat, one of the greatest sermons in the whole history of proclamation, she says what she needs to say. It comes from Mary’s own words, because Mary is a preacher. Mary knows her son, and she is going to set it forth. Knowing her son, she knows that God’s word is trustworthy and true and reliable. Even though she has gotten an assignment that is going to pierce her right through, even though she has gotten a calling that is going to be the death of her, even though this is going to be her own crucifixion, she does not stand up and say, “Hey, look at me; you must have picked me out because I’m qualified.” All right, she says: “Let it be with me according to your word.”

In the meantime, we have enough fun here to last a while. Before I quit and take some questions, I’ve been thinking about next week, because I know you birds have Christmas Eve on Saturday and Christmas Day on Sunday. In one sense you could say that’s a mercy, because usually it’s three days in a row, or three days on and off and then another. This year there are just two sets of services, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, which is Sunday. So when we get together next week, I want to play with the Christmas Eve gospel from Luke again, which is more fun. Only the good Lord would think of putting angels and shepherds together in the same story; we just have to rejoice in that. And then we’ll do the gospel text, and maybe one of the additional texts, for Christmas Day. We can’t do the whole thing, but we’ll do as much as we can. In the meantime, you know my prayers for you.

Questions and Answers

A comment on Gabriel’s greeting, “Greetings, favored one,” in the Greek.

Kyle, I was looking at the Greek today, and it is so beautiful that Gabriel says, “Greetings, graced one.” Don’t you love that? “Greetings, graced one, the Lord is with you.” That’s so great. This is what Ernst Käsemann used to say: the gift and the calling go hand in hand. God never calls without a gift and never gives a gift without a calling. So here we have Gabe and Aufgabe, gift and task. She is being called to something that no one in the whole history of the

human race has ever been called to, and she is greeted as the graced one. With this word the angel provides what she needs to carry out such an incredible burden. That's just beautiful.

A comment contrasting Zechariah and Mary.

That's true, Tim. Zechariah has nothing to explain, no excuses for why Elizabeth is pregnant; the old goat couldn't leave her alone even at that age. Mary has much to bear in order to bring the Son into the world. That's exactly true. Just think of what she is going to bear. As she was told, "A sword will pierce your own soul too." This is going to be the death of her as well as the life of her. There is no privilege without the burden that is carried along with it. She's great.

Heiko Oberman used to draw a big contrast between a Marian Christology and a Mary-less Christology. In Rome, by inference, Mary has become co-redemptrix. Protestants, on the other hand, tend to ignore her altogether. Well, this is the time to really sing her praises. She's a great woman.

A question about how Catholics came to read Gabriel's greeting as though Mary were the source of grace rather than its recipient.

That's exactly right, Mark. I've been thinking about this since I started work on the text. I tend to be very appreciative of Catholicism now. Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, has been very good to us, encouraging and supportive, so I don't like to make critical comments. But I think that in the 1870s, when Mary came to be spoken of as co-redemptrix with Jesus, it was theology by inference: one implication setting the basis for another, which in turn makes the first implication look like fact. That's really a house of cards.

When Mary becomes the mother of God, the Theotokos, well, you can't draw any other conclusion from the theological argument; Mary must be Theotokos. But when that becomes the basis for the next step, and then the next, you're way off into something different again. I don't think it comes out of the language as much as it comes out of that kind of inference.

A comment tying God's dwelling with us back to David's house.

Now you're cooking. David wants to build a house, all right, and God simply shows up and houses himself. Just perfect. God is going zu Hause, going home. He is finally becoming what he has wanted to be since the beginning of creation. He wants to go to his bar mitzvah and get

his ears washed and hear, “Today you are a man.” This is too much joy; it’s just spilling over. That’s just perfect, Marnie.

And Mark, that’s a fabulous question. I wish I could give you a source. Maybe that old Heiko Oberman argument on Mary would do; I’ll see if I can find the citation for you. Drop me an email and I’ll go fishing for it.

Well, this is my favorite time of year. I love this and Holy Week. It’s so fabulous; you can just stand up and preach Christ Jesus to the depths of the gospel. So power to you. You will be in my prayers, and I’m counting on the good Lord to bring home his message through you, and I know he will. God’s peace. I’ll talk to you next week before Christmas and wish you the joy of the season then.

SOURCE

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