

**- Saint John's Pulpit (Dec 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent)
- "The Good News Delivered In-Person" Luke 1:26-38**

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then 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.

Those Who Received the Good News

We call this Sunday Christmas Sunday because it is Sunday before Christmas Day. Usually, this Sunday is full of Christmas programs, activities, music concert, baptism, and children's Christmas presentation. We really miss St. John's Christmas Concert. So do I! Why? Because there is no sermon on Christmas Concert Sunday! We all pray that we can do all these things in the next year...

However, although we are limited to enjoy all these things, but let us be thankful for all we've enjoyed. Then, let's plan to do these things again with humble and thankful heart when we go back to a normal.

Luke chapter 1 is very interesting one. If you read it with Matthew chapter 1, your joy of reading the birth of Jesus will be enriched and deepened.

These two Gospels (Matthew and Luke) narrate a story of Jesus' birth in different perspectives. Matthew develops this story focusing on men and herein presents stories of Joseph and the Magi substantially.

On the other hand, the Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus' birth with a story of the Virgin Mary. In addition to this, Luke encourages the minority to become a main role in writing the Nativity. So, it is notable to see the Shepherds receive the Good News from the angels directly.

Here is one more interesting point when you read both Matthew and Luke. It is about God's messengers or angels to deliver the Good news of Jesus' birth. In the Gospel of Matthew, God's messengers are shown 'in a dream' (can we say it a virtual delivery?)!

For Joseph,

¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:19-20 NRSV

For the Wise Men,

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:12 NRSV

For Joseph (the role of Mary is very limited here),

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰"Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Matthew 2:19-20 NRSV

Plus, all God's messengers are anonymous!

Now it is time to explore the Gospel of Luke especially about Jesus' birth. Here are a couple of things to make a difference from Matthew. One is that God's angel was present in-person! The other one is that God's angel's name

was shown – Gabriel! Luke chapter 1 presents two characters and their birth stories. One is John the Baptist and the other one is Jesus.

However, the main focus of this chapter turns to each of parents seriously telling how they could receive the good news by the angel. If so, we can find two main characters to develop this story – one is Zechariah, a father of John the Baptist. The other one is the Virgin Mary, a mother of Jesus. Both Zechariah and Mary received the good news of their giving birth to a baby.

Interestingly, the angel who delivered this news was Gabriel. In the Bible, Gabriel was known as an angel who specially delivers God’s secret, oracle, and message. You can meet the angel Gabriel in the Book of Daniel knowing that Daniel received God’s message through him.

¹⁶and I heard a human voice by the Ulai, calling, "Gabriel, help this man understand the vision." Daniel 8:16 NRSV

In the very next chapter,

²¹while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. ²²He came and said to me, "Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. Daniel 9:21-22 NRSV

Likewise, it was meaningful for Gabriel to deliver God’s message to Zechariah and Mary. Furthermore, Gabriel visited each of them in-person, not in a dream!

¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. Luke 1:12-13 NRSV

For Mary,

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Luke 1:28-29 NRSV

Isn't it interesting? From one old man and to one little (tiny) girl (presumably Mary was 12 or 13 years old at that time), God sent his angel and gave them this good news, which means God's message is available for all people. When Gabriel visited Zechariah and Mary in-person, there was one common opening remark – Do not be afraid!

Don't you think that we all need the same remark - 'do not be afraid' as we are waiting for the Good News in this challenging time? In addition to this, do you know that those who received the Good News overcame fear and stress?

Zechariah was afraid of the good news given from Gabriel. He had to interpret it by his science and experience asking "how will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years (Luke 1:18)."

Mary also was much perplexed. The shepherds were in a field facing cold and dark night with fatigue. The Wise Men had to endure lots of difficulties during their journey. In a word, the Good News is not a free donut! It is given to all those who overcome anxiety, stress, hardships, skepticism, suspicion, and fatigue by their faith.

Where are we now? We are still in the pandemic. Yes, we are afraid of what we see now. Lots of anxiety, stress, and hardships physically, emotionally, and financially. However, here is the reason why we are excited to receive the good news. God wants to tell this now. Do not be afraid! Even in the pandemic, God is sending his angel to give us his comfort and promise.

Another joy for today is to welcome a new member at St. John's! Could we expect to see this moment in the pandemic? When all churches are closed, limited to do their services and gatherings, but God allows us to welcome a new member today. Don't you think that this is the very good message from God?

God is still working among us. God is sending his messenger to deliver the Good News. Even if we do not see an angel standing at our side, please know that God wants us to be another angel to someone now saying "Do not be afraid! Jesus is coming to this world!" Merry Christmas!