

Advent No. 2 “The (Holy) Spirit of Christmas”

Luke 1:26-35

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We continue the Advent theme of these December morning sermons, as last time, by using a single verse to introduce our theme. This morning it is Luke 1:35. But since it belongs to the account of the “annunciation,” we’ll begin our reading at v. 26.

Text Comment

v.26 That is, in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

Nazareth, as you remember, will figure later in the Gospels because of its insignificance. It is called a city here, but perhaps that is only because the Greek of the period did not have a word for “town.” [Morris, 89] It certainly wasn’t much of a city and it isn’t mentioned in any of the primary sources of our knowledge of Palestine at the beginning of the first century. Indeed, Luke mentions that it was in Galilee, because his readers would otherwise not likely know where it was. [Bock, i, 106] We would call it a village, not a city. Zechariah was met in the temple, the very center of Jewish national life. But Mary was met in Nazareth. [Green, 84; Bock, 107] Much of the Lord’s work would be among the common people, the despised and disenfranchised. That he should be born to a no-account Jewish maiden from a no-account town is surely significant. It is part of his humiliation, his great stoop down for us and our salvation.

v.27 Important information: 1) Mary is a virgin, a fact repeated twice here and then confirmed by her own mouth later in the paragraph; 2) she is betrothed but not married (in those days meaning that she was formally, even legally committed to marriage to Joseph – as we learn in Matthew 1, a divorce would be required to break a betrothal – but that they were not yet living together as man and wife), a point of some importance because, of course, there is to be no thought, no suggestion that the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ occurred in the ordinary way; and 3) Joseph was of the house of David, a descendant of Israel’s greatest king, and, therefore, any son he should have would belong to David’s line, a prerequisite for the Messiah, who, according to the prophets and according to the original promise the Lord made to David, was himself to be a descendant of David.

By the way, we should probably, though not certainly, think of Mary as an adolescent by today’s standards, not a young woman. It was typical in Jewish practice of the period for girls to be married or at least betrothed by her 12th or 13th year. During betrothal the girl remained in her father’s house. [Green, 86]

v.28 As you may remember, a great deal of confusion was created by the Latin Vulgate’s translation of “favored one” by “*gratia plena*,” full of grace. That was taken by Roman Catholics to mean that Mary had grace in abundance, so much so that she could be a source of grace to others. No one, including Catholic biblical scholarship, defends that meaning of Luke’s words today but the damage was done. “Highly favored” is the idea,

as will be clear by the explanation of his greeting given to her by Gabriel in v. 30. Or, as Albrecht Bengel the early German Lutheran biblical commentator noted, the words mean not that Mary is the “*mother of grace*, but a *daughter of grace*.”

- v.31 Jesus, as you know, means “savior.” It is the Greek form of the name Joshua, formed from the verb “to save” and means “The Lord is salvation.”
- v.34 Mary understood human biology! [Bock, 118] Gabriel’s response in the following verses confirms that Mary’s question concerned the *method* of this conception. She wasn’t denying that God could do it. She wanted to know how it was to be done.
- v.35 The matter is put very delicately. There is no suggestion of God *mating* with a human woman, as we find so often in the Greek myths. The terms do not suggest sexual activity at all; what they suggest is divine agency. [Green, 90] What is said is that the power of God would accomplish the conception within her.
- v.38 We are inclined to miss the heroism in this reply of quiet but complete submission. No young woman in her situation, no girl in the Judaism of that day would be unaware of the complications that inevitably would follow a pregnancy of this kind. But she submitted to her calling as God’s will, complications and difficulties notwithstanding.

When people think of the Christmas history, when they read it from Matthew or Luke, when they sing it in the Christmas hymns or hear it sung while at home or shopping at the mall, a familiar cast of characters inevitably appears. There are Zachariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the angel of the annunciation, the angels who appeared to the shepherds, the shepherds themselves, Simeon and Anna, the magi from the east, and King Herod. One of the things that makes the Christmas history so charming on the one hand and so historically authentic on the other is precisely its cast of characters, so true to life, and most of them so unquestionably human beings of that time and place.

But there is an actor in this drama who virtually never is mentioned in any of the Christmas hymns and whose presence is largely missed even when the history is read straight out of the Bible. He appears here in v. 35: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...” Commentators have long pointed out that the verb used in this verse and translated “overshadow” harks back to the Spirit of God’s “brooding” or “hovering” over the waters at the creation in the second verse of the Bible.

“This is not, to be sure, the first appearance of the Holy Spirit in the Christmas narrative, nor the last. The angel who appeared to Zechariah while he was burning incense in the temple told him that the son that would be given to him and to his wife Elizabeth in their old age, the son he was to name John, would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. Later, when Zechariah delivered the prophecy we know as the *Benedictus*, the hymn that concludes the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we are told that when he spoke he was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Later, when Mary, now pregnant herself, visited Elizabeth, soon to deliver the son who would grow up to be John the Baptist, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaped with joy because both she and he were *filled with the Holy Spirit*. When it came to be time for God to break into history, to

bring to pass the promises of old, to accomplish in his Son the salvation of the world, *the Holy Spirit is everywhere making things happen!*

But, back the principal point, God the Son was conceived in the womb of his virgin mother *by the creative action of the Holy Spirit*. However it happened that a male baby was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, however it happened that this human baby was joined to the person of the Eternal Son of God, it happened by the power and working of the Holy Spirit, who has often been called “the executive” of the Godhead, the one who brings the divine plan to pass. We too often forget that it was the Holy Spirit that brought about, that caused the incarnation of the Son of God. But we would miss the stupendous significance of this fact if we did not go on to notice and then to ponder that, from this point and throughout the entire course of the Lord’s human life on earth, he was accompanied by, enabled by, empowered by, and directed by the same Holy Spirit. There were two persons involved in God’s incarnate life and ministry, the Son and the Spirit.

As you remember, this is precisely what the prophets had foretold centuries before. In Isaiah 11, written some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, we read that

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
From his roots a branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him...”

And in the first of Isaiah’s songs of the servant of the Lord, the coming Messiah, we read

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
My chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him.” [42:1]

And this is precisely what God did, as the Gospels make emphatically clear. The early prophecies made about the infant child by Simeon were made, we are told because the Holy Spirit was upon him. Later of the hidden years of the Lord’s childhood and young adulthood, Luke tells us in 2:40 that “the favor of God was upon him.” What does that mean but that the Holy Spirit was with him and was enabling him to grow in wisdom and understanding and, as Luke puts it in 2:52, “in favor with God and man?” That is an extraordinary statement, isn’t it, that Jesus the boy and young man *grew in the favor of God*. We might well have thought that he was from the beginning of his life as much God’s favorite as it would ever be possible to be. But it was not so. Jesus developed, he matured, he gathered wisdom and spiritual insight and deepening conviction. How did he do that? By the power of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his heart.

At his baptism the Spirit came upon him afresh as Luke tells us in 3:21. This was, at thirty years of age, his anointing for the priestly work of teaching and making sacrifice he had come to do. Immediately thereafter, as we read in 4:1, Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit” was led “by the Spirit” into the wilderness where he fasted and was tempted by the Devil. What is Luke telling us? That the Lord bested the Devil through that more than a month of dark and difficult days *because his faith was protected by and strengthened by the Holy Spirit*. Lest we miss that point, at the

conclusion of Luke's report of the Temptation we read, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee..." In his first sermon, preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, his hometown, he used for his text Isaiah 61 which begins:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

And as it began, so it continued. *Everything the Lord did he did in the power – that is with the present aid of the Holy Spirit.* Everything he accomplished was in, by, and through the Holy Spirit who was with him. From what came the extraordinary power of his teaching, why did it have the mesmerizing effect that it had on great multitudes of those who heard him? John the Baptist had told his great crowds that the one coming after him would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And so it happened. His words suddenly had *authority*; they brought *conviction*; the crowds who heard him knew that this was a different voice than any they had heard before. It was the Spirit that created that impression by his enabling the Lord to speak as he spoke and by impressing the hearts of the Lord's hearers as he spoke. As John tells us in his Gospel (7:46) the people who heard him said, "No one ever spoke like this man!" It would happen again in Christian history, the words of a preacher suddenly captivating immense crowds of people. And there too it was the Holy Spirit at work!

I suppose most Christians naively assume that Jesus performed miracles as God the Son, with the divine power that was his because he was God. God can heal the sick, still a storm, give sight to the blind, even raise the dead. *God can do anything!* But Jesus in the Gospels is everywhere and almost always – the Transfiguration the notable exception – *Jesus the man*. It was *a man* who changed the water to wine, *a man* who fed the 5,000, *a man* who gave sight to the blind, *a man* who raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. But how could a man do such things? We are told. He did them, as Moses and Elijah before him, *by the power of the Holy Spirit*. Jesus himself said that it was "by the Spirit of God" that he cast out demons. [Matt. 12:28] Peter, in an extraordinarily important statement, tells us in his sermon in the house of Cornelius that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." [Acts 10:38] How was God with Jesus? In the person of the Holy Spirit, that is how! In fact, so dependent was Jesus the man upon the power of the Holy Spirit that there were times when Jesus couldn't perform a miracle. It wasn't by his own divine power that he worked miracles. *The man Jesus needed help!*

How was it that Christ willingly went to the cross, to the terrible suffering of his death? We read in Hebrews 9:14 that it was "through the eternal Spirit" that he "offered himself without blemish to God..." The writers of the NT knew very well that *everything* the Lord did he did through the power of the Holy Spirit who was with him. Jesus himself had taught them that!

In the grave the Lord's body did not begin to rot. Why? Because as the prophet had long before foretold God would not let his Holy One see corruption. But surely by now we know that the person of the Godhead who preserved the Lord's body for his resurrection was none other than the Holy Spirit. That conclusion is confirmed then by the fact that the Lord's resurrection is likewise attributed to the Holy Spirit. Paul makes a point of this in Romans 6 when he turns to his readers and exhorts them:

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

Follow the drift of Paul’s thought there. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, but he did it by the Holy Spirit, just as God the Father sent his Son into the world, but it was by the Holy Spirit that he actually arrived as a human being in the womb of his virgin mother. Again we have the Holy Spirit as the executive of the Holy Trinity, the person who executes the will of the three-person God.

There is much more evidence that I might cite but I have said enough to make the point. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, did not exploit his divine powers or prerogatives in his life and ministry as our Savior. He did that as a man, a true and authentic man, a man with all the weaknesses of mere creatures such as we are, with all the limitations of our nature, apart from sin. How was it possible then that a mere man should have done what he did, should have accomplished what he accomplished? And from beginning to end the Bible’s answer to that question is that it would not have been possible except that he was enabled, he was empowered, he was accompanied, he was kept, he was preserved, and he was directed by the Holy Spirit. If I may put it more crudely, the incarnation and the atonement was a two-person job!

Now that is highly interesting, not least because we don’t usually think of the Lord’s life and ministry in these terms, not matter how often the Bible tells us to think in those terms. But taking all of this data together, some extraordinary facts emerge.

1. *The first* is the true humanity of Jesus. We always struggle to keep this clear in our thinking. We find it so easy to think of Jesus as a superman, as if his divine nature empowered his human nature. But it was not so! We do not rightly understand the incarnation, the meaning of Christmas, unless and until we understand that Jesus lived his life and did his work as our Savior *as a man: a human being just like you and me, apart from sin*. He lived his life, he did his work, and he saved us from our sins *as a man*. That is what makes the incarnation so vitally necessary. Our savior had to be one of us, a man for men. Who is the mediator between God and man? Paul tells us: *the man* Christ Jesus. [1 Tim. 2:5] *That Jesus could have lived so completely as a man is the mystery of the incarnation!*

But how could a mere man do what he did? Well, a mere man, by himself, left to himself, even a sinless man, *could not do what Jesus did*. He needed help and he got it from the Holy Spirit. Jesus as a man could not have bested the devil in the wilderness (the Devil is more powerful than a human being), could not have commanded the crowds as he did, could not have performed the mighty works he did, could not have remained sinless through the entire course of what was the most difficult, the most tested human life ever lived, could not have conquered death, and could not have risen from the dead without help, the help the Holy Spirit gave him every step of the way. He could not and so he did not make his journey alone, the most important journey ever taken by a human being.

2. *The second* of these extraordinary facts that emerge from the Bible's pervasive witness to the fact that Jesus had an inseparable companion throughout his earthly life and ministry is that no mere human being, not even a sinless human being, no human being could by his own wits, his own powers, his own will save us from sin and death. If even the man Christ Jesus, if even the human nature of the incarnate God, if even *this* man could not do it by himself then it cannot be done! [Lethem, *Union with Christ*, 46]

If you needed to be convinced that salvation is of the Lord, is a work that only God can do for you and in you; if you needed to be persuaded that you are helpless to save yourself, here is the unassailable argument. Jesus Christ himself couldn't save us by himself; to save us *even he* needed the power and presence of God. And if he needed that, how much more human beings like ourselves who are not only mere creatures with all the limitations of our lives, but deeply sinful, broken, bent, disfigured creatures who have accumulated a lifetime of offenses against both God and man, who have fashioned a life of selfish disdain for God and for others, and whose lives are now consigned to move along the deep ruts of sin that we have carved by long years our years of foolish and wicked habits.

If any vestiges remain of spiritual self-confidence remain in your heart, let this be the end of them forever. Even Jesus himself couldn't gain salvation for others apart from the divine power exerted on his behalf by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the author, the only author of true, eternal life among human beings. The proof of that is that he was the author of that life even for the one perfect, sinless man who has lived in this world of ours. [Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 3, 292]

So let us go back to the beginning. Is it not a terrible mistake for us to forget the role the Holy Spirit played in the Christmas story? Mary gets much more attention than the Holy Spirit. So do the shepherds. So do the angels. But the entire history, those glorious events that brought eternal life into the world, were the doing, the accomplishment of the Holy Spirit. I venture to say that the Holy Spirit is not himself offended by the attention we pay to the other characters in the Christmas story. The divine humility is such that the Spirit rejoices in the attention that is paid, because of his work, to Jesus and to worthy saints. That is the very nature of his work, to shine a light on others deserving of our faith or our admiration. Jesus said as much in his magnificent address on the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal.

But you and I need to remember the role the Spirit played in the drama of our salvation. We need to remember that it was the Holy Spirit who made Jesus who and what he was. Jesus was a man of the Holy Spirit *par excellence*. And what makes that fact doubly important for you and me is that *we too are to be people of the Holy Spirit*.

The whole explanation of salvation in the Bible teaches us to believe that it begins – the new birth and the gift of faith – it continues – in sanctification and spiritual growth – and it is consummated at the resurrection *by the power of the Holy Spirit*. You and I too, if we are to make the journey from this world to the next as Jesus did, we too must make it in the power of the Holy Spirit. We too must have the same inseparable companion that Jesus had. Just as Jesus did we too must be led by the Spirit, just as Jesus did we must walk by the Spirit or keep in step with the Spirit. We too must depend, as he did, on the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and the power of the Holy Spirit in us.

If you are anything like me, you forget days on end that the Holy Spirit is with you; you forget that he has been given to you as the seal of your salvation; you forget that by a conscious effort to walk by the Spirit, depending on his presence and his power to do what pleases him, by this means alone we succeed in the Christian life, in our battle with sin, in our offering service to the Lord. You forget that when you pray the Holy Spirit is alongside of you praying with you and for you, with unutterable groaning, as Paul says. Just to remember that single fact must alter the way we think about our daily existence; surely it must!

As Jesus Christ was a man of the Holy Spirit, we are to be too. As he did what he did by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to do the same. And as he depended upon the Spirit for the strength he did not have in himself, so must we too. We too are mere human beings, weak and severely limited in what we can achieve in the Devil's world with hearts like ours. But with the Holy Spirit at work in us and for us, what can we not achieve?

The ministry of the Holy Spirit throughout the whole course of the life of Jesus Christ is the irrefutable evidence of the necessity of his ministry in your life and mine. Here too the Lord Jesus left us an example that we should follow in his steps: he walked with the Holy Spirit and so should we. And how is that done? Not by some technique. Simply in this way: by being conscious all the time that he is with us to help us and then to act in the strength of that conviction. God made the same promise to you that he made to his Son, even if in a different degree.

“I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes...”

It is ours then to believe that promise and to prove it true!