

Luke 1:26-38

“If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” We’ve all heard this advice. Many of us have probably given it. As a result, when a sweepstakes letter comes in the mail and it begins: “Congratulations! You have won...” few of us take the time to even finish reading what it says. The letter is promptly tossed into the trash. We can see winning amounts of five, ten, or twenty dollars...possibly; but the odds of winning big money are slim to none, and so our eyes and ears are programmed to tune out any such ridiculous news.

But 2,000 years ago the Publisher’s Clearinghouse truck pulled up to Mary’s home in Nazareth, and the messenger which entered her house was an angel by the name of Gabriel; and the news he told her, more than any other news, sounded too good to be true. She wasn’t the winner of a sweepstakes. She did not win the Galilee lottery. Mary was favored by God. She was to be the mother of the world’s Savior.

Now Mary could have responded in typical human fashion—disbelief, skepticism, plain old doubt. She could have asked for proof. She could have showed Gabriel the door and told him to get lost. But she didn’t. She believed him. She asked him to tell her how this would happen because she was a virgin, and with simple faith she said, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary is not the rule; she is the exception. By nature we humans do not believe what God says. His Word of Law clearly tells us that we are condemned. Like a condemned house, rotten to its core and about to be demolished by the bulldozers, so we sinful creatures are rotten through and through because we continue to disobey God; we live by our rules, not His. And so His Word of Condemnation reaches our ears and says, “You will die on account of your sin...the wages of sin is death...the soul that sins shall die.” But we disagree. We are skeptical of what God says. We respond with unbelief: “Others are worse than me...I’m not so bad...I’m doing the best I can...I’m basically a good person... God is love, so He won’t condemn me in the end.”

Not only do we live by the standard, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is;” we also live by this one, “If it sounds too bad to be true, it probably is.” And so ultimately we don’t believe in hell and condemnation. It sounds much too bad. Or at least we don’t believe that we or anyone we know will be condemned there. We accept sickness, pain, and sorrow; even misery and death in this life. These things are not good, but they’re not too bad to be true either. They’re a part of life. We deal with them and move on as best we can. But a God who would condemn a person to hell? That’s much too bad to be true. Even though His Word of Law is clear. Even though we admit that we deserve a place there when we confess our sins in church, because it all sounds too bad to be true, we hold within our minds a healthy dose of doubt, skepticism, and plain old unbelief.

But you and I need to understand something about God. When He speaks there is no doubt. There is no room for skepticism in what He has said. Even if no one were to believe Him, God’s Word is the absolute truth. And the sooner we deal with this, the better, because with God there is no middle ground. Everything He says...everything...either sounds too bad to be true, or it sounds too good to be true. His Word of Condemnation sounds too bad, and His Word of Grace sounds too good. There is nothing in between. There is no purgatory. It’s either heaven or hell. “I a poor, miserable sinner,” we confess,

“Deserve to be punished now and forever.” This extreme is way too bad to be true. But then this word reaches our ears, “You are forgiven; you will not die, but live.” And this extreme sounds way too good to be true.

Mary is the exception, not the rule. The reason she believed God’s Word to her spoken by the angel is due to this one thing—God gave her faith to believe it. He did not give her proof. He gave her His Holy Spirit. Within her heart God’s Spirit worked faith so that Mary said with joy, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

Like Mary, you have heard God’s Word this morning, but it’s not natural for you and me to believe it. If we believe the truth that we are, as God’s Law declares, deserving of hell on account of our sins, then it is because God’s Holy Spirit has convicted us of this truth. We may not feel condemned. We may look rather good compared to other sinners. But if we say with sincere hearts, “I am a poor sinner, and I deserve eternal condemnation for my sins,” then it’s because, even though it sounds too bad to be true, we believe it because the Holy Spirit is at work through God’s Law within us.

But He doesn’t stop there. God’s Spirit gives us faith to believe not just that which sounds too bad to our ears, but that which sounds too good as well. “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit I forgive you all your sins.” You heard these words this morning. I’m no Gabriel, but your pastor is God’s messenger to you today. And I’m not up here to tell you that you won some million-dollar sweepstakes. That’s nothing compared to the true riches that God gives you. Your God forgives you. The Baby born of Mary took your punishment. He was condemned for you. He went to hell on the cross to suffer in your place. You will not die eternally; you will live forever. Heaven is yours in Jesus. For Christ’s sake, God forgives you.

Not one of us, by nature, would believe this. It sounds way too good to be true. But it is the truth. Mary was favored by God, and so are you. Not because of how you have lived, but because Jesus made you His own in Holy Baptism, and He gives His holy life to you. And His Spirit comes to you through the same exact Word which Gabriel gave to Mary, so that as she believed God, so do you; and as Jesus came to be within her, so He comes to dwell within you.

“Let it be to me according to your word.” You say this each and every week. Every time you say the word, “Amen,” you are speaking with the faith of Mary—“Let it be to me according to your word.” “I forgive you all of your sins,” God says to you through His pastor. And you, like Mary, respond, “Amen!” “I believe in Jesus Christ...born of the Virgin Mary...was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He rose again from the dead... I believe in the Holy Spirit...the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” We confess this truth and then, like Mary, you say “Amen!” “Our Father who art in heaven,” we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” and like Mary, you say “Amen!”

Hearing the words of our Lord spoken over the bread and wine, and the pastor saying to you, “The peace of the Lord be with you always,” you say with Mary: “Let it be to me according to your word”—“Amen!” Receiving, with that bread and wine, Jesus’ body and blood for you, the pastor says to you, “Depart in peace;” and with Mary you respond “Amen!” And with arms extended, God’s messenger tells you the same word which

Gabriel told Mary: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.” And even though these words of God to you, like all of His words to you in Christ, sound too good to be true—with Mary, one last time before we meet again next Sunday, you say with faith and joy: “Amen!”