

## **“Announce! The Hope of Eternity”**

*Reading: Luke 1:26-55*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Let’s just try to imagine for a moment what this might have been like for Mary. Now, of course, Mary the mother of Jesus is world famous and has been so for centuries, but if you’re a young, unmarried teenage girl in first century Galilee, you’re pretty well ignored by society. You don’t have land or wealth or children or skills or even a husband to give you status in other peoples’ eyes. There’s no reason for anyone to honor you in a patriarchal, agricultural society like that. You don’t have ambition or plans for your life, because your plans are given to you by other people. You don’t expect anything greater for yourself because your job is to remember your place. Nowadays, teenage girls are an important demographic if you’re selling clothes or a TV show; it wasn’t so then.

And then an angel appears and starts speaking to you. Some people don’t have a hard time accepting the presence of angels because sometimes people talk about guardian angels protecting us unseen, or angels visiting us or giving us messages or something but appearing as a normal human, or we quote that passage of the Bible that reminds us to be hospitable because people have entertained angels without knowing it. We don’t know what the angel Gabriel looked like when he appeared to Mary, whether the sky parted and he appeared in a blaze of glory, whether he had wings or a halo like in the paintings, or whether he just looked like a regular human carrying a message, but it’s pretty clear that his appearance is something special. He begins with those words that the angels so often need to say — “don’t be afraid” — but he also says something very unusual. The archangel Gabriel, who spends his time living in the presence of God Almighty, greets Mary as one who is “highly favored.”

Now maybe you’ve met someone who genuinely thinks of themselves as being “highly favored” by God, and are just waiting for the angel to show up and confirm it. Most of us, I suspect, would be surprised. We know that church people always tell us that God loves you regardless of what you’ve done, but you probably don’t expect special treatment quite like that. That would be doubly true of Mary. Probably no one had ever paid her much attention in her life. And here is Gabriel, who is as far as we understand things one of the highest-ranking servants of God, specifically carrying a message to the person everyone else ignores.

What would you expect him to tell you? Why would such an important being bother to tell *me* anything? I would probably expect a message of judgment, that I’d better clean up my act or God would smite me. But Gabriel gives her a message that is in many ways similar to the announcement he gave Zechariah last week, that God was about to fulfill His ancient promises to this nation of people who had been waiting for so long. And Gabriel says something else: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” To someone who has no reason to expect history to remember her, and in fact it wouldn’t even occur to her to try to be famous, here is an angel announcing the coming of an eternal kingdom, a kingdom that will last forever. To a world that is aching for a firm foundation in the midst of perpetually turbulent times, he announces an eternal kingdom. To a race of people who live and die as quickly as blades of grass, he announces an eternal kingdom.

Even at the best of times, when the world is at its most stable, we can't help but notice how fleeting the things of this world are. Mary's people had never known a real, lasting kingdom of their own for more than a few hundred years at a time, and even then, our Bible is full of the trials they lived through. Jesus was born in the Roman Empire, one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen, a kingdom that surely seemed eternal at the time, with a name that still recalls glory and respect, and yet now its great accomplishments are crumbling. Kingdoms rise and fall. Our own American "kingdom" will one day also be a crumbling memory, if Jesus does not return first. And even before then, our own political system involves a regular change of leadership; the "kingdoms" set up by our different political parties now will not remain for long. There are no eternal kingdoms in our world of change. You might find something that will outlast *you*, but that's not much of a comfort. In our faddish, fast-paced culture of constant consumption, we ache for something solid.

The idea of eternity, of going someplace when you die, of heaven and hell, is a very useful idea. Sociologists and psychologists have conducted many studies that show how a belief in eternal things affects behavior and contributes to actions that let humans form larger social groups. For example, one study gave children a game that was difficult to play without cheating, then left them alone (though with hidden cameras). The researchers told some of the children that there was an invisible princess named Alice with them in the room who would be watching them. And, of course, the children who had been told about Princess Alice were much less likely to cheat than the children who were not. And likewise, studies have shown that even mentioning words like "God" to adults will make them more likely to be honest. On a more earthly level, sometimes we put stickers in our windows saying we have an alarm system even though we don't, because even that threat of being watched is enough to deter a lot of would-be thieves.

So of course a lot of people have noticed that you can use the threat of eternity and consequences and being watched to control other people. You need to be a good person because God is watching you, and if you're bad you'll go to hell. He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake. Don't be bad or Santa will know about it and you'll get coal in your stocking. And the church knows this, so we see the angel announcing that Jesus will bring an eternal kingdom, so we start thinking about heaven and hell, and sometimes we automatically jump to warning people to be good or they'll burn for eternity. We can turn God into a celestial policeman, watching everything you do to make sure you keep in line, or else He'll throw you into jail. Fear is a powerful motivator.

Now of course from other parts of the Bible we realize that heaven and hell are real, and there are certainly eternal consequences, both good and bad, for the choices we make. But here the angel Gabriel is making an announcement about hope, not reminding us about eternity to motivate us through fear. He is pointing Mary — and all of us who are listening in through the ages — to the demonstration of God's power that is revealed through the birth of this child Jesus. We know nothing but change and uncertainty; we live knowing that we will die and eventually be forgotten in the grave, but here is something that will last because God is doing something so great that it will stand. We hear Gabriel's announcement and we focus on the virgin birth of Jesus, and that is indeed a miraculous, powerful thing. But equally important is this announcement of God creating in Mary's womb a new race of humanity in this Lord whose reign will be so good and so great that it will never end.

And so we have an odd contrast between the angel and Mary: the celestial being radiant with the reflected glory of God, mysterious and rare and magnificent, kneeling in front of the unknown, obscure, backwater girl who has no earthly reason to be honored by anyone. Gabriel has a message of hope in a kingdom that will last forever, and is therefore the greatest kingdom the world has ever seen, but he brings it to this humble girl who would otherwise be of no consequence to historians or emperors or generals. It is a message of incredible hope. It's an announcement to those who are humble and forgettable, an announcement that they are not excluded from this eternal kingdom. In fact, it is an announcement that those who are humble and forgettable are *especially* invited to be a part of it.

Everyone loves a good underdog story. They never make movies about the juggernaut sports teams that always win every game; they make movies about the misfits and losers who have to struggle and fight to win against all odds. I watched the recent *Captain America* movie last week and enjoyed it even though I'm really more of a Batman fan, but the story of Captain America is of Steve Rogers, a frail ninety-pound-weakling who is scientifically enhanced to become a super soldier. Or Peter Parker, who is a bullied nerd until he's bitten by a radioactive spider and becomes Spiderman. We love those stories of humble people who are humble enough to be responsible and gracious and end up coming out on top out of some act of cosmic justice; the bullies get put in their place and the nice guys get to win. We want to believe that someone is paying attention up there and the world is eventually just.

This announcement about Christ's eternal kingdom is a proclamation to the world that yes, God is paying attention to us, and yes, the good guys do win in the end, and the victory is especially for the humble people in the world. The glorious angel makes his announcement to the humble maiden. He doesn't waste his breath on the great kings and emperors. In fact, as we look at the history of the church, it's the humble nobodies who come to Christ first, and then later *they're* the ones who carry the announcement to the somebodies. God is revealing His power through this child born at Christmas who will build an everlasting kingdom, but God's power is not just power for its own sake, it's directed: He shows His power to the humble and the lowly because those are the people who are able to enter His kingdom first. His kingdom was made for them.

In Mary's famous song of praise, she sings of how God "has been mindful of the humble state of His servant." "He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty," she says. In the Christmas event, God is pouring out His power to build an eternal kingdom that upends the world's power structures and brings hope to those who are on the outside. What that means is that when we are at our lowest points in life, God announces His kingdom to us louder than ever, because He loves the humble. Those who cling to their pride will not see it. They will chase after the things that do not last. They will close their eyes to the eternal kingdom in favor of more impressive ones that will one day crumble. And it is only by humbling themselves that they will see the kingdom of this Christmas child.

That kingdom arrived with the birth of Jesus many years ago, and we are still waiting for Him to return and bring it to completion. There is still time to follow Mary's example, to have the hope of a kingdom that won't fail, to hear the announcement of eternity. We prepare ourselves for Christmas

by choosing humility. God is building an eternal kingdom and you are invited to it, if you are humble enough to see it.

The announcements of the angels in preparation for the birth of Jesus point us to the important parts of the reign of Christ. They tell us how to prepare. Are we ready for this humble king bringing a humble kingdom? But they also tell us what we ought to announce, because these words are not meant to be kept to ourselves. Do we speak words that bring hope of eternity? Do we speak humble words that bring glory to our eternal king?



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