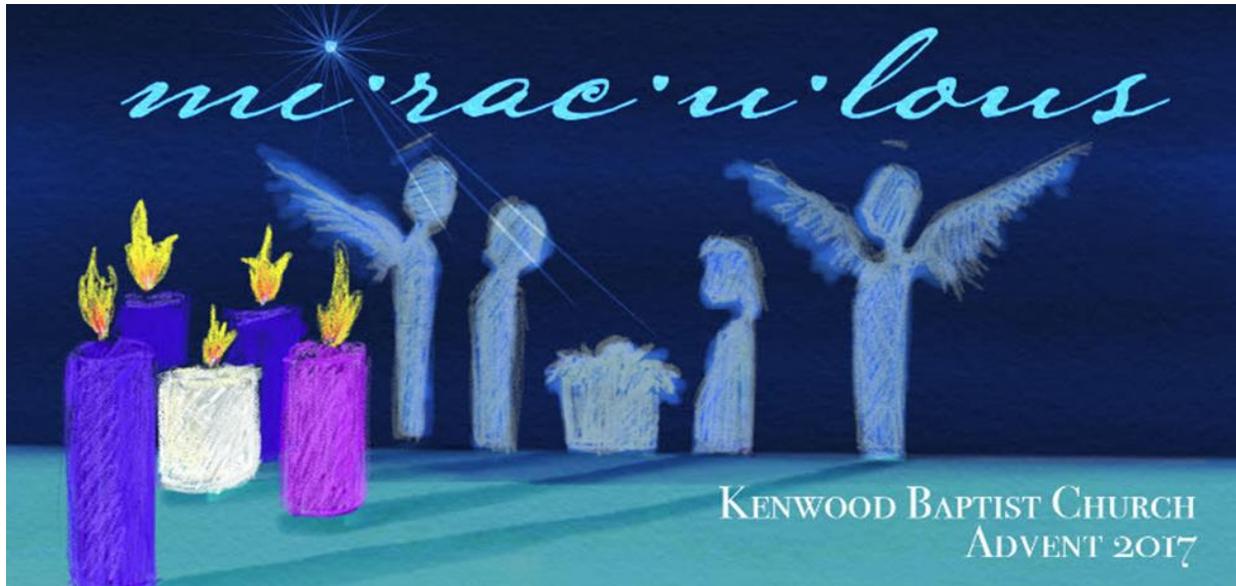


***"Mi·rac·u·lous Son"***  
Advent 2017 Sermon Series  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
December 3, 2017

**TEXT: Luke 1:26-38**



Good morning, Kenwood. There are several signs that Advent is upon us. Let me give you just a couple. For us as a family, the unofficial beginning of the Christmas season is the Homebuilders' Sunday School Christmas party, and so we celebrated yesterday with the dear saints of our church. It was an amazing time gathering together to eat dinner and remember. The Advent season is also marked by the Advent issue of Ecclesia, so if you haven't picked this up on your way into the church, be sure to pick one up on the way out. The Ecclesia will describe to us what's coming up in our Advent series and Christmas events here the church. We are excited about this time of year. This Sunday we begin our Advent series. It's a series called *"mi·rac·u·lous."* If you look up *miraculous* in the dictionary, you will find two definitions: 1. *miraculous* is stated to be something that is "occurring through divine or supernatural intervention, or manifesting such power"; 2. something "highly improbable and extraordinary and bringing very welcome consequences." No one says: "It was a miraculous flat tire that I got." No one says: "It was a miraculous filing for bankruptcy," or "It was a miraculous end to that friendship." *Miraculous* is something that happens through God's agency and power. It is extraordinary, and it always brings very welcome consequences to this world. The season of Advent marks the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and these weeks are associated with hope, love, joy, and peace that come into the world through Jesus Christ. This year for Advent

at Kenwood we are going to explore the birth of Christ, our promised Messiah, from four scenes in the Gospel of Luke. The first scene we will look at is the scene where the angel Gabriel announces the coming of a *miraculous Son*. Next Sunday, we will look at how Mary responds with praise for a *miraculous Savior*. We will then continue in Luke's narrative to see how Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesies about a *miraculous King*. Finally, as we come to Christmas Eve Sunday morning, we will follow the heavenly host as they gather to proclaim good news of a *miraculous message* for all people. Christmas is a season of miraculous things, and those miraculous things center in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, so I want us to tune our hearts to miracles this Advent season. Keep your Bible open, and let's look together at Gabriel's announcement to Mary, of a miraculous Son that has come into this world.

Luke 1:26 begins:

*"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,"*

The *sixth month* refers not to June, but to the time of Elizabeth's pregnancy. We will talk more about that later in our series. Elizabeth, who was barren, is found to be with child, and it is in the sixth month of her pregnancy that the angel Gabriel was sent, sent from God. Gabriel in Hebrew is *Gibor - El*, which means a *mighty angel* or a *warrior of God*. When you think of the angel Gabriel's coming, you should not think of a Hallmark card or something suitable for an ornament. Gabriel is found in Scripture as a mighty warrior, one at whose presence people are overwhelmed. Gabriel seems to be one who stands near the presence of God and is sent at critical moments in the Bible to reveal God's great saving purposes, His ultimate saving acts. We see Gabriel three times in Scripture. The first is in Daniel 8. Daniel sees a glorious vision in Daniel 7 of how the kingdoms of this world and their eventual fall by the kingdom of God which will have no ending and no limits. Daniel was overwhelmed by the vision that he saw, and so God sent Gabriel to explain it to him. Daniel says in Daniel 8:15-16:

*"When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it. And behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai, and it called, 'Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.'"*

So we learn that Gabriel, though he is a mighty warrior of God, is an angel and is near God's presence. He looks almost humanlike—the appearance like a man, and he is sent to explain to Daniel God saving purposes. Daniel knows from Scripture that to prepare ourselves for God's great saving action, we should repentance and pray, and Daniel picks up the sin of this nation in a very moving prayer in Daniel 9. When he confesses the sin of his entire society, pleading for God to return in saving power, he mentions Gabriel a second time in Daniel 9:21-22:

*“While I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, ‘O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.’”*

Gabriel appears to be a mighty, powerful angel that is sent from God when God is about to do something extraordinary in the earth. We see him for the third time in Scripture before our passage this morning, in Luke 1:19 when he comes to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He is overwhelmed with the announcement that his barren, elderly wife will have a child, and he is mute at the thought of it, and the angel Gabriel is sent to him, and in Luke 1:19 he says:

*“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”*

What a view!

So we see this angel sent from the Lord. In Luke 1:27, he is sent to a virgin, a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph. He is sent to Galilee, to a very small village—Luke very generously calls it a city, the city of Nazareth. Gabriel is sent to this young woman. She is betrothed; she is engaged to be married. Her name is Miriam, the name of Moses’ sister. There are only two Miriams in the Old Testament: Moses’ sister and one very obscure Miriam in 2 Chronicles. Her name is Miriam, and that comes over through the Greek into English as *Mary*, but Miriam is really her name. She is young; she's betrothed; her fiancé is named Joseph, and we are told that he is from the house of David. This becomes incredibly significant later on in the narrative. But two times in the introduction of Miriam, this young woman, Luke takes particular care to identify her as a virgin. That is critical to our narrative this morning. This young virgin, engaged to be married, receives a visit from this mighty warrior that stands in God's presence. Gabriel comes to her and greets her in Luke 1:28 and says to her:

*“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”*

The greeting is a typical one, the statement that she is favored. Some translations render this “Oh, most highly favored.” The text simply says that Mary is one that has found favor in God's sight, and the extraordinary piece of this announcement is that Gabriel says that the Lord is with you. Those of us who know the Bible well will recognize in this formula, *the Lord is with you*, as an echo of God's announcement to many in the Scripture when He is about to do something miraculous. The Lord says this to Isaac: *“I will be with you and bless you”* when He confirms the promises of Abraham to his son. The Lord says this to Jacob as he returns from exile: *“Return to the land and I will be with you.”* The Lord says this to Moses at the burning bush: *“I will be with you,”* He says, as He commissions Moses for this saving purpose. When Joshua takes over the leadership of the nation to enter into the Promised Land, the Lord says:

*“Just as I was with Moses, I will be with you.”* He speaks to Gideon in Judges 6 when the angel appears to him and says: *“The Lord is with you, mighty man of valor.”* This announcement of the Lord that *“I am with you”* implies that I'm about to do something extraordinary and miraculous in the earth through you. It's that announcement that explains to us Mary's initial reaction. The ESV says that *“she was greatly troubled at the saying.”* The Greek word that Luke uses here literally means *she was stirred up*. Her insides were churning at such an announcement. Can you imagine being a teenager and having a mighty warrior angel of God appear to you, whom you were not expecting, and announce to you: *“The Lord God Almighty is with you. He is about to do something miraculous in the earth through you”*? Whatever your reaction would be, it's a right reaction, isn't it? Mary was stirred up; she was filled with a holy awe of what God was about to do: the terror of holiness; the overwhelming presence of God. She was stirred up, and then the ESV says *she was trying to discern*. Luke literally says she was dialoguing within herself; she was just talking with herself, *“What might this mean? This is not the typical greeting. What is the significance of this particular type of greeting from the angel?”* As she was stirred up, as she was reasoning within herself what this might possibly mean, Gabriel continues and calms her fears. Isn't that kind of this powerful angel? The New Testament says that the birth of Christ is something which the angels long to look at. Gabriel who saw this and was sent with this announcement calms her fears in Luke 1:30:

*“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”*

This is a wonderful biblical idiom, to find favor or grace in the eyes of God. It's important for us to emphasize that there is nothing that Mary does to deserve this involvement in the Kingdom of God. Mary does not possess a peculiar holiness that merits her selection. Mary finds grace like the rest of the sinful world, and it's a beautiful idiom. She finds favor or grace in the sight of God, and finding such favor, the angel announces to her this good news of a miraculous Son who was to come into the world. In Luke 1:31, Gabriel continues with his announcement:

*“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus.”*

Some of you may be thinking initially that it's not that miraculous, but let me tell you, the birth of any child is miraculous. I remember seeing our first child born and thinking this is miraculous! One of the lessons I learned as a young pastor was that 25% of people struggle with infertility. Fertility is not a given thing. For any child to be born is miraculous, and I don't want to give that away. Not only will Mary conceive, but she is told that she will bear a Son and she will call His name Jesus. This in Hebrew is *Joshua* meaning *Yahweh is salvation*. Though there are many Joshuas in the Bible—it's a very common name in the first century—the name itself signals something miraculous about this Son, that He will bear in His own name the saving power of Almighty God. Luke does not interpret this name for us, but Matthew does. When Joseph and Mary are instructed to give this particular name to their son in Matthew 1:21:

*“She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”*

Gabriel continues with this announcement to Mary with a list of qualities describing this miraculous Son. In Luke 1:32 we’re told:

*“He 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 father David,”*

What does it mean that this Son, this Jesus, will be great? When we think of greatness we sometimes think of a great athlete; we think of a famous politician or a scholar, and yet in the New Testament world, to be great is a royal image. It's a royal image that this Son born to you will be king-like. That is like what the prophet Nathan said to David in 2 Samuel 7:8-9:

*“Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.”*

Mary and Joseph’s Son will be a King is the first word. Not only will He be a king like the great ones on the earth, He will be called Son of the Most High. It's another royal image: He will be intimately related to God Himself; He will be known as not only a great ruler but He will be like the Most High. Joseph and Mary are told that the Lord God will give Him the throne of David, His ancestor, and we hear echoing in this one of the great promises and hopes of the Old Testament. God had promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:16:

*“And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever.”*

The Lord made a covenant promise to David that He would raise up a descendant and He would give Him an everlasting throne. How critical it is that we are told in this small phrase that Joseph was of the house of David. We have here a royal image. In 2 Samuel 7 we’re told that one of David's descendants will reign forever. Isaiah prophesies and foresees this when he says in Isaiah 11:1-4:

*“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what His eyes see, or decide disputes by what His ears hear, but with righteousness He shall judge the poor.”*

The Son of David is coming; He will reign forever. Jeremiah 23:5-6 says:

*“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous*

*Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which He will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"*

This is announced to Joseph and Mary: the Lord will give Him the throne of David. In Luke 1:33, Gabriel continues, this mighty warrior of God. He says:

*"... and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."*

Do you feel the weight of the word *forever*? Your Son will be King; your Son will fulfill God's promise to David of an everlasting Kingship; your Son will rule over God's people forever and of His Kingdom there will be no limit—there will be no end, there will be no terminus, there will be no geographical boundary is the image of this last phrase. The promise of this Son is not only that He will be a king. He will be ruling over David on David's throne; He will rule over the house of Israel forever; and His Kingdom will have no boundaries. He will be King not only over all of David's ethnic descendants, He will be King and reign over this entire world.

Do you feel the weight of *forever*? Do you feel the weight of a Kingdom with no boundary? I used to disrespect national boundaries. Having a US passport makes you insensitive to geographical boundaries. You can go straight from Ohio to Indiana with no border crossing. You can do that over and over and over until you reach the Pacific Ocean. It is a big place that God has allowed us to live in. I remember when I was trying to cross the boundary from Western China into Kazakhstan. I was still at that stage in my life when I was disrespectful to national boundaries, and there was some small issue with our paperwork. That's the time when the Kazakh soldier came on the train with AK-47 and said: "You will have to get off now." That was the moment when I learned to respect national boundaries. But, you see, this King with His rule will have no boundary. It is what Isaiah 9:6-7 says:

*"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."*

That is what Isaiah saw in Isaiah 49:6:

*"I will make You as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

That is what Daniel saw in Daniel 7:14 about this glorious Son of Man:

*"And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and*

*languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

The miraculous Son at the center of Christmas is a King. He is a King who will rule forever and everywhere. The one thing that is impossible to do at Christmas is to be indifferent to Him.

Mary responds initially to this extraordinary announcement from Gabriel, this mighty warrior angel in the presence of God. She asks in Luke 1:34:

*“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’”*

The ESV helps us out by rendering this: *“since I’m a virgin.”* The text actually says: *“since I haven’t known a man.”* Intimacy in the Bible is connected with the ultimate knowing of a person. “I haven’t known a man. How is this going to happen?” As miraculous as the job description is of this Son, the climactic, miraculous feature of the Son at the center of Christmas is described next. In Luke 1:35, Gabriel continues and explains to her and to us: This is how this will happen:

*“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 called holy—the Son of God.”*

The climactic statement of the miraculous Son that we celebrate and remember at Christmas is that He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. The virgin-birth of Christ confronts us this morning. It confronts our skepticism. For some of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, we live in a moment in time that is quite impressed with the works of our hands.

I must just confess that I was overwhelmed by the live streaming of our daughter’s Christmas concert last night in Boston. I was just giddy. We have some pretty neat things that we’ve made, but if we are not careful, we stand in an environment of secular materialism and this statement of the virgin birth of Christ violates what we know about biology. For many of us, we find it impossible to believe. We think that at the center of the Christmas story this is something scandalous. Some of us imagine that believing in Jesus means that we must check out our mind in order to believe. The virgin birth confronts the critical skeptics among us. The virgin birth of Christ also confronts what I call the uncritical confessor. Sometimes people in an attempt to rescue the virgin birth narratives interpret them in ways like this, and I am quoting: “In ancient times, the term ‘virgin birth’ was a figure of speech, a way of pointing to extraordinary personal qualities exhibited by an individual. The term was never expected to be taken literally. In the ancient world, being divine was a description meaning someone who did something very important for the human race, for example: Alexander the Great was said to be born of a virgin; Augustus Caesar; Julius Caesar; Plato; Pythagoras; Buddha; Socrates, and many more were said to have been born of a virgin, through divine intervention.” The worst part about this quote is

that it comes from a church leader in Columbus, Ohio. That's why I call it the *uncritical confessor* because sometimes we uncritically take in the supposed insights of higher critical scholarship on the Bible and try to rescue the narrative by saying: "Oh, this is just metaphorical language. We can't possibly believe this."

In thinking about this, I read this week an article written by Vince Vitale. Vince Vitale is an up-and-coming apologist for the Christian faith, a very gifted man. He is a graduate of Princeton



and the University of Oxford and is the national director of the Ravi Zacharias Institute in North America. He is a very articulate spokesman for the gospel, and the good news is that he is going to be at Kenwood in April with his wife. But Vince Vitale shared an article in which he describes correspondence that he had with a dear friend who had retired from Princeton University. His friend, who was a professor, detailed in

this letter to Vince all of his objections to the Christian faith. His final remark seemed to overshadow all other considerations and was authoritatively written as if to definitively close the argument: ". . .nor can I believe in a virgin birth." Such a belief was apparently implausible, absurd, and immature. Vince records in his article:

"I considered responding to my friend with positive reasons for believing in a virgin birth, but then I realized that he was, in fact, *already* committed to a virgin birth."

Listen to the Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking's proposal for our universe:

". . .the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist."

*Vitale writes:*

"But physical matter doesn't normally materialize out of nothing, so this account also presents itself as outside the realm of the ordinary. Is this a less miraculous birth than the story of Jesus?"

Consider the position of the prominent atheist philosopher Quintin Smith:

"The fact of the matter is that the most reasonable belief is that we came from nothing, by nothing and for nothing . . . We should . . . acknowledge our foundation in nothingness."

Vitale further writes:

“It is therefore not a matter of *whether* we believe in a virgin birth, but *which* virgin birth we choose to accept.”

We live in a miraculous world. We can believe in the virgin birth of an atheistic universe that is indifferent to us, a universe where Richard Dawkins asserts “there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.” Or, we can believe in a virgin birth of a God who loves this world so deeply that He “became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Emmanuel, God with us. We can believe in a world where the creative power of the Holy Spirit creates life, like in Genesis 1:1-2: “*The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*” We can believe in a world where the creative power of the Holy Spirit makes humanity in the image and likeness of God, as the Bible says in Genesis 2:7:

*“. . .then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”*

We can believe in a world where humanity in the image and likeness of God is accountable to obey God's command and to fill the earth with His praises. We can believe in a world where God designs to rescue fallen humanity with a new humanity and brings them into the world fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 7:14:

*“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”*

We can believe in a world where God brings this miraculous Son our Savior into it by divine agency. We read in Luke 1:35:

*“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 called holy—the Son of God.”*

This signals to us why the virgin birth is so important for redemption. Jesus comes into the world, and He is born into the world, and He is called holy from His birth. This is something that will never be said of any of us. This was my moment of exegetical euphoria this week. I just couldn't make it past this. This isn't said of any of us. Have you noticed that you don't have to teach your children to disobey you? Have you noticed that within our hearts there is a fallen nature and we come into this world needing to be redeemed? But this Son comes into the world, and Gabriel tells Mary climactically the outcome of the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing her is that her Son is born holy. He is born with sinless perfection; He is born Son of God through divine agency and yet born, really born, with Mary's womb, and so He is truly human. He is divine and human, a new man, a new Adam carrying the destiny of humanity in Himself. As Gabriel tells Mary in Luke 1:37, this happens:

*“For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

The virgin birth is critical, and we are called to believe.

Mary said in response to this glorious announcement in Luke 1:38:

*“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your word.”*

We serve a God for Whom nothing is impossible, and we worship a miraculous Son, Jesus Christ our Savior who is divine and human. Let all mortal flesh keep silent, a holy awe. The Son of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. He took on flesh to redeem it, and He was able to redeem it because He was born from a virgin’s womb. Jesus, Son of God, Son of Man! The virgin birth of Christ challenges the skeptics among us to believe. It challenges the uncritical confessor who who feels they must reinterpret the Bible, as if God needed our help.

I want to call us this morning to join together in the consistent and united testimony of the early church. Aristides, just two generations after the gospels, wrote that Jesus is the Son of God, from a virgin took human flesh. Tertullian, a leader in the church of Africa says the churches of Africa share the common confession of the virgin birth of Christ. Ignatius, about AD 110, echoes the same. The early church witness and confession, that later became known as the symbol of faith, the confession of faith we now call the Apostle’s Creed, dates back to about AD 100, and I want to end this morning by reciting this together. Notice in this creedal confession, right in this second paragraph about Christ, is this confident assurance that He came into the world born of the Virgin Mary. If He had shared our sinful humanity, He could not have offered a perfect sacrifice. If His humanity had been imagined and just appeared to be, He would not have been able to redeem our own. This miraculous Son, the center of the Christmas story, Jesus Christ our Savior, has come. Let's join our voices with millions of others who have confessed these words in creedal confession. Let's close by reciting together this creed.

### **The Apostle’s Creed**

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth.  
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried.  
He descended into hell.  
On the third day He rose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.  
From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Christian Church,

the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen

Lord Jesus, we honor You together this morning. We give You our praise. We give You our hearts' affection. We thank You that You have come to this world, Son of God, Son of Man, to seek and save the lost.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.