In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This evening we gather together to celebrate. We are celebrating the conception of our Lord Jesus, we are celebrating that great announcement from Gabriel to Mary that Christ would be *conceived* in her. This is the feast day the church calls the Annunciation of our Lord. Celebrate, you might ask? But we aren’t supposed to do that during Lent! Well interestingly the festival of the Annunciation almost always falls during Lent and the universal church, in her wisdom, has continued observing this feast day even knowing it often comes during a season typically marked by fasting.¹ For centuries now, the feast to celebrate our Lord’s conception is set for March 25th, which makes good sense since this is exactly nine months prior to Christmas when we celebrate his birth.

So this evening, now two days after the high feast day, we change our paraments to white and join the church’s celebration. We come together to remember and marvel at the reality which we confess every time we gather: “*he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit*” in the womb of young Mary. For this day marks the very first moment, in history, on this earth, when the new creation, the new kingdom, the new covenant of our God had decisively begun. No longer through tablets of stone or pillars of fire, no longer through a rock which pours out water, God’s visitation is *conceived* of quite differently now, literally *he* is conceived in the body of holy Mary. My prayer is that in our commemorating this glorious event by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we will be enlivened, purified and strengthened as we persist in faith during our Lenten journeys. So now let us turn our hearts and minds to the first chapter of St. Luke.

We enter the scene encountering the angel Gabriel, sent by God to bring this divine announcement. Previously in the chapter we hear of the same angel making another spectacular announcement to the priest Zechariah who was fulfilling his duties and praying in the temple at the hour of incense. Gabriel went to proclaim to this righteous priest that his aging wife Elizabeth, who was barren, would conceive and give birth to a son who would be named John—the one we know as John the baptizer. Gabriel now leaves Zechariah and the clouds of incense filling the temple in Jerusalem—seemingly a fitting place to find an angel—and visits the foul-smelling, humble little town of Nazareth in Galilee. He enters the unadorned house of a poor young maiden with a message from God that will change the whole history of the world.

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“Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” Perplexed and speechless, Mary is greatly troubled as she considers what sort of greeting this might be. “Favored one?” I can almost hear her outburst. “But I am not doing anything especially worthy, I have no official title among people, I have no role in the temple, I am a poor young woman who lives in Nazareth! Favored one? How could this be?” Whatever thoughts and emotions may have rushed through Mary, she does not burst out in confusion and concern, she does not even utter a single word. Silently, she seeks to discern this strange greeting, and wonders at the angel’s words.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for the Lord is with you,” Gabriel announces. God has announced his favor with Mary in the mere presence of his visit. Gabriel proclaims God’s presence and action in Mary’s feeble estate, promising God will fulfill what he says will come to pass. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” In your womb, even yours. You, Mary, will follow the very ordinary progress of nine months with this child growing and developing inside of you, yet you will bring forth a son whom you will call Jesus. He will take to himself your very flesh, but he will be anything other than ordinary. For “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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

To this majestic announcement, Mary replies with a question, though it is a question quite different from Zechariah’s initial question in the temple. Whereas Zechariah asks, “how will I know [my wife Elizabeth will conceive a son],” Mary responds, “how shall this be?” She doesn’t ask “how can this be” or “how will I know this will be,” but “how shall this be.” It’s a question that apparently assumes Gabriel’s message is true: it shall happen, but how? “After all,” Mary says, “I have no husband, I am a virgin. This doesn’t seem humanly possible, so how will it come to be?” She apparently trusts the message Gabriel declares enough to assume he’s not referring to some time later on in the future after she’s married to Joseph. “How shall this be” seems to be a valid question, and one that Gabriel does not scorn, but rather, anticipates.

He answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” You’re right Mary, it is not humanly possible for a virgin to conceive—Almighty God has to do it. The same God, the same Spirit whom you have heard of all throughout your young life, the God whose mighty presence hovered over the deep and divided sea from land, he will speak his Word in you—and a new creation will be born. The One who overshadowed and resided in a cloud and pillar of fire, guiding his children

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during the great Exodus, he will now overshadow and reside in you. He will guide you even in these coming months of uncertainty, and you will bring forth from your womb THE Promise of all promises, Jesus the Messiah. God himself will come upon you by his Spirit and you will conceive. You will conceive this One who will be given the throne of David, and of his kingdom there will be no end. So then the child to be born through you will be called holy, the Son of God. And the same God who is forming new life in the once-barren womb of your cousin Elizabeth, he will form his own life in you—for nothing will be impossible with God.

Wow, I wonder if Mary had to take in a deep breath after all of that! Though we don’t get to hear what was going on in Mary’s mind and heart at this decisive moment, we do hear in her response that she did not turn away from the Word that came to her. She did not become entangled in herself. She did not, at least at first, consider all of her frailties or her status as a poor young woman. She didn’t even object because of what she probably assumed would happen to her upcoming marriage to Joseph. She did not follow up with a few more questions, like, what exactly do you mean the Holy Spirit will overshadow me, what might this involve?

Mary heard the words of God from Gabriel and in striking humility, she assents. “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.” Mary’s response not only shows she has heard and received Gabriel’s words, but that she has accepted and trusted that they have come to her from God himself. This can only be because the Lord is with her. His Word has worked in Mary, bringing about precisely what he willed. God’s Word opens her up to him, even by helping her speak this humble, receptive response in faith.

The announcement we celebrate tonight, in the end, is not about Mary, though she is certainly the most highly favored lady as we just sang about in our hymn. We cannot remember Christ’s conception without blessing the chosen vessel through whom he came. It is good and right that every generation from this moment forth goes on calling her blessed, as she herself said under the guidance of the Spirit (Luke 1:48). Far from belittling or overlooking her, we thank God for her. We magnify the Lord with Mary because he is with her, even knit together in her womb, for us and for our salvation.

The Most High God wills that his Son will descend to the lowliest of depths, even to this poor young virgin’s womb. And so Christ Jesus, without ever ceasing to be the Son of the Most High, comes down from the glorious heights of heaven and visits our world by indwelling Mary. Why? Because of his perfect love for each of us. He does this out of his love for young Mary and aging Elizabeth, for unbelieving Zechariah, for poor Peter floundering on the water, for that dear man at the pool suffering for thirty-eight years,
for each person we passed by today, and even for that little baby inside of the pregnant woman. He was conceived for all of us. He willed that we should not go on in our sin and unbelief, our poor estates, but that we should be saved even from the inside out, from the beginning until the end. Jesus was conceived for us.

The One through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together, the One who fills all in all, condescended to be but a single cell. He did not yet have lungs that would fill with the oxygen he made, or lips to speak the words that would forever change the plight of man—“your sins are forgiven.” He did not yet have human eyes through which he would behold his creation, or ears to listen to the pleas of his children. No, he condescended to such a lowly state, even to being a mere speck, that he might take on human form at the earliest stage of life, at conception, just like you and I did.

He was conceived, so that no part, no moment of our lives would be untouched by his living, divine presence. He did not choose to come down and take on the form of an already-grown man, he did not choose to take on the form of a radiating, brilliant light that would show forth his glory. He was conceived inside of Mary so that the conception of every human person could be redeemed and sanctified, could be filled with his light and beauty. And consequently, he was conceived so that we might revere and cherish every human person and each stage of human life—from conception to death—just as he does. He comes to bring his life to us beginning at his conception, so we might regard every person as worthy of honor and dignity, worthy of being guarded and protected and nurtured, and ultimately, worthy to receive love.

We the baptized gathered here together celebrate our Lord’s conception, we lift our hearts to the One who loves us and just so brings us to share in this event by the same Spirit who conceived him. We too have been overshadowed by this Spirit who joins us to Christ in the waters of baptism so that he might live in us, just as surely as he was living inside of Mary. And by his steadfast, perfect love he too calls us his favored ones, those whom he wills to dwell in and re-shape, to re-form, just as Mary’s body was quite literally shaped and formed anew. By his grace, he promises the gift of faith so that we can say with Mary, yes Lord, let it be done unto me as you have said. Let your own Word, your will take shape in my life, on earth as it is in heaven.

Each day the Lord grants us, we have yet another opportunity to echo these words, to turn to him in faith because he is with us, even living in us. So when you hear those words, “I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins,” you can whisper quietly to yourself, “let it be unto me as you have said.” Or when you hear our Lord say, “I am with you; do not be afraid” (cf. Mt. 14:27), you can respond, “let it be
unto me as you have said.” Or when you hear, “you have been made whole, go in peace, and sin no more” (cf. Mark 5:34; John 5:14; 8:11), you can say in your heart, “let it be unto me as you have said.” And when you hear those words, “this is my body, given for you...this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins,” you can come to the altar and with thanksgiving say, “let it be unto me as you have said.” Brothers and sisters let us celebrate and feast on this good news! Let us relish in this our Savior, once conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and present among us now, to whom belongs all glory and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.