

## CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

### 1. CALLED

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Luke 1:26-38

Angels are God's messengers. And while our Bible is full of the actions and interactions of angels, we are only provided with the names of two of them—Michael and Gabriel. Michael is mentioned in the book of Daniel, Jude, and Revelation. We read about Gabriel in the books of Daniel and Luke. In the book of Daniel, Gabriel, whose name means Mighty One of God, helps Daniel interpret visions.

In the New Testament, we find Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke. He first appears to the priest Zechariah in the temple in Jerusalem where Zechariah is performing his priestly duties. Zechariah is alone in the sanctuary when the angel appears. Zechariah is terrified. Gabriel has come to inform Zechariah that Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, is going to conceive a son. That child will become known as John the Baptist. Because Elizabeth and Zechariah are getting on in years, and because they had no children, and it was believed that Elizabeth was unable to conceive, Zechariah asks the angel how this could possibly happen. Because of his doubt-based fear, Zechariah is struck mute for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. (Later, his wife would confess that her prayers had been answered.)

Six months later, the angel appears in Galilee having been sent by God to the town of Nazareth. The first thing we need to know is that Nazareth is not a booming metropolis. For one thing, it is in the backwater region of Galilee. And for the other, we know nothing about this place. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was likely a small, agricultural village. It even appears to have had something of a reputation. In the gospel of John, when the soon-to-be-disciple Nathaniel learns that Jesus is from Nazareth, he responds by asking, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* (John 1:46). (The Nazareth Chamber of Commerce has been fighting this bad publicity for 2000 years.)

So, the angel Gabriel, the Mighty One of God, is sent by God to an insignificant village to meet a young woman named Mary. Technically, the young woman is a *parthenon*/παρθένον—a Greek word which means young and unmarried. Almost all of our translations label her a virgin. This young woman is engaged to a man named Joseph. Most significantly, Joseph is described as being a descendant of King David, the former king of Israel. In that day, engagement was a serious step on the way to marriage. A young woman, usually between the ages of 13 and 20, would be engaged to a man—typically arranged by their parents. But the couple would not live together for a year. Once the man's family had paid the dowry for the young woman and he had built them a place to live, then they would hold the

marriage ceremony. Often the place to live was a new room built onto his parents' home.

Immediately, we recognize the power differential in this story. On the one side, we have an angel of the Lord, and on the other, we have this completely powerless girl.

The angel speaks first saying to Mary, *Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.* Unlike Zechariah, it does not appear that Mary is frightened by the angel. She was however *perplexed* by his words, and she *pondered* what sort of greeting this might be.

Imagine if Mary were a teenager today and she was shopping at the Lebanon town square, when this tall, striking man in a Corvette convertible pulls up next to her and says, *Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.* Hopefully, she would indeed ponder these words. What kind of line is this man giving her? What does he want? Should she engage him or just keep walking. As the parent of a daughter, my suggestion would be to get away as fast as possible. This guy is bad news.

But the angel carries on. And you'll notice that it is Gabriel who does most of the talking in this story; Mary says very little. The angel continues with the trademark angelic statement of *Do not be afraid.* He addresses Mary by name and tells her that she has *found favor with God.* In other words, God sees something special in this woman.

As a result, Mary will conceive and bear a son. We are all familiar with what comes next. It is the heart of our Advent and Christmas readings.

*And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'*

Once again, I want to ponder the power dynamics at play here. We have the archangel Gabriel—the Mighty One of God—addressing a young woman from a small village in an outward province of a tiny nation at the very edge of the Roman Empire. This heavenly being tells this girl that she is going to be the mother to the Messiah.

Mary's response is the pinnacle of practicality when she asks, *How can this be, since I am a virgin?* That word virgin is not *parthenon* as we read it earlier. Literally, what Mary says here is, *How can this be, since I have not known a man?*

The angel explains it to her saying, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; consequently, your child will be holy. He will be called Son of God.* The angel then adds that Mary's cousin Elizabeth, whom everyone assumed could not have children, is now in the sixth month of her

pregnancy. He then provides the answer to Mary's question, *How can this be?* by telling her, *For nothing will be impossible with God.*

Mary's final response to the angel's news is simple and unexpected. She says to the angel, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word.* And the angel departs.

The question for us today is this: Why is it that when Zechariah questions the angel, he gets shut down? And yet Mary suffers no consequence? The answer, I believe, is that Mary is somehow special.

Zechariah was a priest from a long line of priests. He used his time standing within the inner reaches of the temple, where the public was not allowed to visit, to pray for a child. He was, in fact, praying for a miracle. And yet, when that miracle presents itself, his fear causes him to question it. He, of all people, should have welcomed the angel, and not have been terrified of it.

Mary, on the other hand, is quietly living her life in Nazareth, engaged to be married, picking out her china pattern and interviewing caterers, when the angel drops in with a life-disrupting announcement. This is not anything that she has been praying for, or even imagined. Her question to the angel does not stem from a lack of faith, but it is a simple request for clarification. And when it is explained to her, she responds with a concrete commitment, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*

For the author of the gospel of Luke, Mary is a paradigm of discipleship. She accepts the call without hesitation. The angel tells her twice that she is favored. I believe that what is meant by favored is that in her God has observed an unquestioning faith, a level of faith that we should see in people like Zechariah, but don't. Her faith is like that of Abraham who answered God's call without reservation and followed God to a new land. Abraham himself had questions, but he did not doubt; he did not fear.

In the same way, God calls Mary with a life-upending announcement that she will have a child that is not the child of her husband-to-be. Society will frown on her unwed pregnancy. But she commits to her new role as a God-bearer. Her final affirmation, *Let it be with me according to your word*, is not unlike the words Jesus spoke before his death. In his prayer on the Mount of Olives as he waits for Judas to arrive, he says, *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done* (Luke 22:42).

The young woman Mary's life will be changed. She will give birth to the child, and she will suffer the pain of his execution.

We view Mary as a model of discipleship because of the way she accepts God's call. For us, she is an example and an inspiration for our accepting what God may call us to do. Through Mary, we can learn to set aside the doubts and fears that

hobble our faith. We can learn to mimic her humble trust and obedient service. We may not be the physical parents of Jesus, but we can have the faith that God's word will be fulfilled. Later on in life, Jesus will answer the question of who is his family by saying, *My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it* (Luke 8:21). We can be members of Jesus family by trusting the word of God as Mary does.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent, a season that leads us to the birth of God in this world, the birth of the child carried by Mary, the birth of God's living Word. It is my prayer that together we enter this season open to the possibilities of miracles, that we remember the words of the angel who said, *With God, nothing will be impossible*. And maybe, we can be like Mary and bear God with us.

Amen.