

Luke I: 26-38

Another angel story: She was around fourteen, fifteen at best. Her family was dirt poor. Never lived anywhere else but here in this little, dusty wide spot in the road. Never ever been away from home or her family by herself.

One day while her parents were gone, a man appeared at her door, dressed in white, and told her she was going to have a baby. And if the shock of the news itself wasn't bad enough (though she *knew* he had made a big mistake), just his appearance out of nowhere nearly scared the life out of her. This wasn't the doctor from the clinic in town out for a house call. He was an angel, a messenger, with a word from God.¹

His name was Gabriel, and if you'd seen him for yourself, you'd've known why nobody who met him would ever have had entertained even the faintest notion of calling him "Gabe." Not that he seemed self-important or pompous at all. But he had this something, this *authority*, and eyes that seemed to pierce her through.

"Greetings, favored one!" he said. What was she supposed to make of it? What kind of greeting is that from some kind of creature you've never before laid eyes on who's just scared you half to death?

And what did it mean? Men, let alone male angels, didn't greet women, not to mention greeting a young, unmarried girl like her.²

And what kind of favor was this, telling her she would have a baby?

She was engaged, or, really, as good as married, just still living at home. No way she could fool around. It just wasn't *done*, not even *talked* about. For a girl like her a fix like this meant only two things: if the humiliation wasn't enough to kill her, the swift punishment of the self-righteous would. There weren't any homes for unwed mothers in these parts. And there was no such thing as a shotgun wedding. The shotgun was far more likely to be used on her. If word got out, she'd be killed.

Even if in the back of her mind she did have the dimmest hope that her intended might be willing divorce her without letting her secret out, she was still terrified.

Even if they were poor, they would have had a wedding, and a party. Even if he was kind of old for her, she'd still dreamed of what their life together might be like. She'd be the mistress of their humble home. And someday, a child. But not like this. Now what would happen to her and the child if they even lived? Where would she go? What would she do without a man to provide for her, a son to care for her in her old age?

She wasn't the first to hear unbelievable news from an angel. Sarah, because she was already an old woman, laughed when an angel told her that she and Abe would have a son, but the angel said to her, "Is anything too wonderful for [God]?"³

When this girl heard the news, she didn't laugh. She just asked with some understandable skepticism, "How can it happen? After all, I'm a virgin."

And Gabriel, the angel, telling her that her cousin Beth and her husband, who'd tried for so long, were going to have a baby boy, too, answered, "Because nothing's impossible with God."

And all heaven and earth holds its breath.⁴ The angels wait. Gabriel waits. God waits. The unknowing world waits its fate. All wait for the answer of this one poor young girl. What will her answer be?

Questions that she knew weren't really questions but protests, raced through her mind. "This is just a dream, isn't it? Or more like a nightmare. Are you sure you have the right house? It's got to be some kind of mix-up. Can't God find somebody more experienced than me? I'm too young. I'm only a girl. I'm poor, just a nobody. Don't you need somebody a whole lot more important than me? And how in God's name am I supposed to explain this to Joe and my parents?" But she didn't say any of those things. She said, "Here I am, God's slave; let it be just like you've said it will."

Gabriel breathes one long sigh of relief and with him heaven and earth. Even God, not nearly as certain as the angels had thought, lets out an inaudible bated breath, and smiles. Then the heavens break out in song. And Mary sings, too. God has turned the world upside down, and it will never be the same again. Just a poor girl, only a nobody from some nowhere place, but she will give birth to the Son of God, God with us in the flesh. And he will reign with justice and peace...

One of the arguments the early Christians heard against their faith was that "God would never have had [the] Messiah come into the world without fitting honor and glory, born of a woman who admitted that she was no more than a handmaid, a female slave."⁵

There are many legends about Mary. Most of us have a picture of her based on those legends and tradition, but the Bible tells us hardly anything about her. One thing we do know is that she was poor, because

the sacrifice she offered at the Temple after Jesus was born met the requirements of the law but was a small one, the offering of the poor: “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

"[The late Tom Matheny, United Methodist Judicial Council leader from Louisiana] had been invited to speak at a church in the Midwest shortly before Christmas. [A pastor] from the area asked if [he] would speak at his small rural church earlier the same Sunday.

That morning the temperature was nineteen below zero. The rural community was extremely poor. Many homes had no indoor plumbing, and many had outer walls covered only with tarpaper.

The church was crowded and the service heartwarming. But there was a little girl on the front row who glowed with joy. Her eyes dancing, her feet constantly moving, she was listening, singing, and praying. [Matheny] couldn't keep his eyes off her.

She was no more than six years old, and she was dressed shabbily. She wore socks on her hands because she had no mittens, and she had walked a quarter of a mile to church.

After the service [he] asked her about Christmas. She simply said, 'All I'll get is what I get here.' But she said it joyfully.⁶

Jesus was born to save his people. He was born to save us as well. To save us from ourselves, to set us free from a life slavishly tied down by things, to set us free to serve God and our brothers and sisters in need of whatever we have to share.

No one should wish on anyone the hardships many are dealing with – or *not* – dealing with this year, but just maybe the needs of others can remind us about what the things that really matter – not just in this season but all year 'round – and in the end.

The song Mary sang about turning the world upside down – the hungry filled with good things for once and the rich sent empty away – the mighty dethroned and the humble raised up – can be a word that we greet with joy or with fear. It's been a song of hope for the humble and poor through the centuries, and it can be ours, too, if we open ourselves to God's wonderfully expansive future. The world will change, whether we welcome it or not.

As Mary prepared him room in her womb, may we prepare him room in our hearts. God grant us the courage to so reorder our lives that with Mary we may greet his coming with joy, not disappointment.

May we find ourselves, by God's grace, willing to give away our most prized gifts so we may claim as our own the most precious gift of all - a savior, who is Christ our Lord.

If, this Christmas, you happen for some miraculous reason, to be surprised by an angel like Gabriel who scared the living daylights out of Mary with unbelievable news about her part in God's plan to save the world from itself, or like the ones who struck terror into the hearts of the tough-as-nails shepherds on the graveyard shift when they came singing, "Peace!..."

If you meet one of those kind of angels, pray to God that you will be given the grace to answer like Mary, not voicing all your understandable misgivings and reservations, but something like, "Dear God. I don't know why you chose me of all people. I'm not really sure I understand what it is I'm supposed to do, but here I am. I'm your slave. I'm ready. Do whatever you want with me. Use me any way you can if there's any way I can serve you."⁷

¹Cf. William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:4 October, November, December 1996, 47-48.

²Leonard I. Sweet, *Homiletics* October-December 1996, 51.

³Genesis 18:14 NRSV, adapted.

⁴Frederich Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, quoted in William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:4 October, November, December 1996, 47-48.

⁵Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 364.

⁶[Tom H. Matheny (Louisiana) **The Upper Room...**]

⁷William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:4 October, November, December 1996, 48.