

**First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida**  
**Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor**  
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Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. [28] And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [29] But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. [30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. [31] And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. [32] 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. [33] He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." [34] Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" [35] The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. [36] And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God." [38] Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

## ANGELS

When people talk about angels it seems to me that they often talk about them in one of two ways. The first group likes to think of angels as heavenly beings who offer them protection from the troubles of life.

It's the old idea that angels are watching over us. We have a guardian angel who is assigned our "case" so to speak.

The other group is more skeptical. To them angel talk seems rather superstitious. Even some people of faith are not so sure that they believe in angels.

But, angels are in the Bible. In fact, today's story is about an angelic appearance, perhaps the most famous one of all. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary with some news.

God is on her side. She is the chosen one. She's going to have a child who is heir to the throne of David. He will be a king, a king whose reign will have no end.

There's just one little itty bitty problem. She's a virgin. How can she have a child?

No wonder some people don't believe in angels ... at least the kind that we see in our lesson for today.

What kind of angel is this Gabriel character? He goes to the little town of Nazareth. (Nazareth is not the end of the world, but I understand you can see it from there.) He

approaches this young teenager who is not married. And he tells her that she's going to have a child out of wedlock.

This kind of thing could get a young woman stoned in those days. That doesn't seem like a very angelic message. Where's the blessing in this message for Mary? It doesn't seem like anyone is looking out for her interests.

One thing is certain. Gabriel is not a guardian angel.

No wonder Mary was perplexed and troubled by this Gabriel character. I would be perplexed and troubled too. I would be more than perplexed and troubled; I would say no way, no how. I would say that this sounds crazy.

A child out of wedlock is too much to bear. This is impossible. No one will believe. It's too dangerous.

## VIRGIN MARY

Every week we say the Apostle's Creed and every week we affirm the impossible. We say Jesus was born of the "virgin Mary." As Mary put it in our lesson for today, "How can this be?"

The fact of the matter is this. It can't be. It's scientifically impossible.

But, I find this question even more perplexing, why does it matter? Why do we include "born of the virgin Mary" as a basic article of faith?

There have been many who have stumbled on this point. This is something that many are just not prepared to believe. One person told me that when he quizzed his mother about this and she replied, "Just shut up and believe it."

And many of us have been quite happy to do just that. We just tell the story and move on. We just shut up and believe it.

But, there's still a little child inside some of us that wants to ask Mary's honest question. How can this be? Why did Jesus have to be born in this way? What can this mean?

## HUMAN BEINGS INCLUDED

One commentator noted that today's passage is not called "The Request" or "The Invitation." It's called the "Annunciation." God through his angel Gabriel is announcing to the world what He is going to do. And human beings are included in God's unlikely plan.

I guess God could have chosen to save the world without any human input. God is certainly powerful enough to do it all on His own. With God all things are possible. And it certainly would have been less messy that way.

But, “The Annunciation” tells us that God didn’t choose to do it that way. God chose to include human beings in the drama of salvation. It began with his gracious choice of a young teen-ager named Mary, and it continues with us.

One of my favorite quotes on this comes all the way from the fourteenth century. Meister Eckhart wrote,

“We are all meant to be mothers of God.  
What good does it do me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place with myself?

And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us.”

To put it another way, as Mary bore Jesus, so we are called to embody the love of the Savior in our world today. The incarnation is not just something that we celebrate once a year in sermons and Christmas plays. The incarnation is the continuing presence of the Spirit of Christ in the world today.

#### ANGELS UNAWARE

Gabriel is not the only angel in God’s heavenly host. There are other angels who come to us this very day. Sometimes we don’t recognize them. Sometimes we are puzzled by their challenging message. But, they still come.

So, who are these angels? Do they have wings? Do they blow silver trumpets? They could I guess.

But, I believe that most angels are quite ordinary. In fact many angels might not even know that they are angels, angels unaware so to speak.

You see in the Bible angels are known primarily by their function. They are simply God’s messengers.

If this is our definition of angels then even you and I may have served the function of angel from time to time. And perhaps some very human angel might bring us God’s challenging message of hope and salvation.

And what will we do if that happens? Suppose you are convinced that God is calling you to do something that seems impossible? What will you say?

Mary said yes.

#### WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT

A member of our Bible study said that he felt called by God to be a missionary. He was going to teach in a Christian school in another land.

But, in order to do that he had to raise enough monetary support to go to the mission field. This was not something that he felt comfortable doing. He was a good teacher and an administrator, but he certainly wasn't a preacher or a fund raiser.

He prayed about this and decided that God wanted him to try even though he didn't have these skills. He sold his house and quit his job so that he could work full time raising money.

It worked. He raised enough money to go to the mission field. But, more importantly he said that he got an education in what it meant to have faith.

I identified with his story. It reminded me of when Carrollyn and I sold everything we had and moved to Atlanta to attend seminary. We moved without jobs or any other means of support.

I'm not so sure I could do that now. But as I look back on it, I think of those days as some of the most exciting and meaningful times of my life. The learning about faith started before I even entered my first class.

In the Bible the stories are often about people being called to do something that seems impossible. God's people are always being led to a new place.

Those stories are not just about finally arriving in the Promised Land.

They are stories about the journey. They are stories about how people come to faith and salvation through the twists and turns of their sojourn in the wilderness.

This is God's training ground. This is the place where we learn to say yes to God's leading. This is the place where we really learn what it means to have faith.

When it comes to following God, it is our job to just say yes. Our job is to learn that nothing is impossible with God. And we learn that by having the courage to take the journey.

Paul put it this way in his second letter to the Corinthians.

We "walk by faith, not by sight."

(2 Corinthians 5:7)

"JUST" SAY YES

It seems so simple. Just say yes to God. Use Mary as your example.

Saying yes to God might be simple, but it is never easy. Saying yes to God means that we will sacrifice our plans for God's plans. Saying yes to God means that we sacrifice our will for God's will.

I like the way one commentator put it. She said that Mary had a choice. She could “take hold of the unknown life that the angel held out to her” or she could “defend herself against it however she could.”

And the commentator pointed out that we have a similar choice. We can say “yes I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or no, I will not.

She concludes, you can say “no” to your life, but “you can rest assured that no angels will trouble you ever again” or “you can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body.”

I really like that last phrase because it connects the call of Mary to our call. As Mary agreed to “smuggle God into the world” inside her own body, aren’t we called to do the same?

Several weeks ago I pointed out that one of the most common phrases in the writings of Paul was the phrase “in Christ.” In other words we too are called to be Christ-bearers. We are called to say yes to God by being the embodiment of the message of Christ. We are in Christ and Christ is in us.

There’s a famous line that goes something like “Christ has no hands but our hands. Christ has no feet but our feet” and so forth.

Most Presbyterians don’t like that little poem because we have a different emphasis. We want to emphasize the sovereign power of God, and those lines seem to suggest that God can’t do anything unless we agree to help. Obviously, as Jesus once told the religious people of his day, we don’t think that we are indispensable in God’s kingdom. If God wants to, God can raise up prophets from the stones of the field. (Matthew 3:9)

God could do that. But, God doesn’t choose to do that.

God chooses to limit His work to human hands. And that just might be the meaning of the virgin birth for our day.

God was in the birth of this little boy long ago, and God continues to be in the world today. The world is not just a speck of cosmic dust in an endless universe. The world is God’s proving ground. The world is that place where very flawed human beings encounter the grace and love of a God who comes to save.

The question of course is this, will we say yes to the kingdom that comes? Will we align our will with God’s will? Or will we say no? Will we run away from the possibility of the Divine invading our own life?

TOO WONDERFUL

A preacher put the question this way, “What is God doing today, here in our midst that is too wonderful for our imaginations or our words?”

That question is very hard to answer isn't it? How can we talk about what God is doing if it is "too wonderful for our imaginations or our words?" How can we communicate if our words and our imaginations fail us?

Maybe that's where the familiar symbols of our faith help us grasp the truth in a way that nothing else can do. These old stories about the Annunciation and the birth of Christ point toward a mystery and a hope that is too wonderful for words. I like the way the old Christmas carol puts it, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight."

Like Mary we will still be perplexed. There is great mystery in this story.

No one thought that any good thing could come out of Nazareth, and no one could have ever believed that the messenger of God would choose a teen age girl from that out of the way place to bear the Son of God.

But, that was the message. That was the hope.

And today we still talk and sing about it.  
And with Mary we still ask, "How can this be?"

But, somehow in our heart of hearts we know it is true. Mary was the mother of our Lord. And his kingdom has not come to an end. The grace and salvation of God in Christ is as alive in the world today as it has ever been.

And we are still being asked by strange angels to say yes to God's call. We are still being asked to bear the presence of God in the world.

### SAM'S STORY

A seminary professor had his students tell why they felt called into the ministry. His favorite call story was by a student who wrote that during his teenage years, "I was the teenager from hell." He made his parents' lives utterly miserable. He was so irresponsible in college that he flunked out and spent a couple of years working.

While working, he met a woman and married. They began attending a little church. Gradually, he came to the surprising awareness that God seemed to be calling him, calling him into the Christian ministry. So he went back to college.

He dreaded telling his parents, after all they had been through, that now his life was taking this unexpected turn. But he told them the story of the surprising turn of events, the way that, though his life had been a series of mistakes and irresponsible actions, he now believed that God wanted him to become a pastor.

Suddenly, his mother burst into tears, saying,  
"I'm so ashamed! I can't believe this has happened!"

The young man was shocked by her response. "What do you mean?" he asked.

“I can’t believe this has happened,” she said.

“Didn’t I tell you that before you were born I had had a couple of miscarriages? I didn’t think we would ever have a child. So I made God a promise. If he would let me have a baby boy that I could bring to term, I would name him Samuel and I would dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament.”

Sam heard all of this with great astonishment.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” he asked. “You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble if you would have told me about this.”

“We’re Presbyterians,” the mother replied. “How was I to know something like this would work? I didn’t even know that we even believed in this kind of thing.”

If you think that the story of Mary being called by the angel Gabriel is strange, think again. Stories about God’s call tend to be strange and a lot more common than you may think.

They are not strange because God sends an angel to call someone, though sometimes God does. Call stories are strange because of whom Jesus chooses to call. He calls ordinary people like you and me.

Like Mary, we think of all of the reasons why this doesn’t make any sense. We are not perfect people. We have baggage. We have limitations. Nevertheless, in our better moments, when the call comes, we, like Mary, simply say “Yes.”

In fact, this appears to be the primary way God changes the world. God calls ordinary people to be overshadowed by a greater power and that makes the ordinary extraordinary. God changes the course of history, not through earthquake, wind and fire. God changes the course of history but through ordinary people like Mary.

Let us follow Mary’s example.  
Let us simply say “yes” to that call.  
Amen.