

## His Birth Foretold

### Luke 1:26-38

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> 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.

Our scripture is called annunciation—the *announcement* of the incarnation by the angel Gabriel. It is the foretelling of the birth of Jesus, even before he was conceived. You and I have heard the story every year of our lives – whether long or short. However, the story of the foretelling of His birth, it always has something new to tell us, something to challenge us to be open to God's call on our lives.

On the Sunday before Christmas, no matter our age, we are in the mood for miracles. The annunciation contains all of the ingredients needed to satisfy this yearning. An angel appears as if out of nowhere, and a virgin learns that she will defy nature and bear a child. To add to the abundance of wonder, the angel alludes to another noteworthy occurrence: a woman well beyond childbearing years is in the sixth month of a pregnancy. Beyond their exquisite mystery, these marvelous foretold and prospective births offer multiple layers of meaning for us during this holiday season, as we seek encouragement and affirmation amid life's quandaries and questions.

Mary's reaction to the angel Gabriel's visit and foretelling of the upcoming birth is cautious at best. Living in a remote village far from the busy religious center of Jerusalem, she had no hint that she was destined for a singularly distinctive role. Our tendency to think that leading unassuming lives in out-of-the-way places isolates us from the extraordinary is debunked by Mary's surprise visitor, just as it is dismantled by television broadcasts of school shootings and forest fires, or small towns that take pride in the accomplishments of members of their communities. Neither notoriety nor acclaim is confined to major metropolitan areas. The selection of Mary to be the mother of Jesus is an occasion to spur Christians to exit the realm of predictability and open themselves up to the unexpected and the unimaginable.

In the fourth century CE, Augustine of Hippo expressed in his *Confessions*, "For all I want to tell you, Lord, is that I do not know where I came from when I was born into this life which leads to death—or should I say, this death which leads to life? This much is hidden from me." There is a natural inclination to wonder why we were born. An only child who knows how desperately his parents wanted to bear children may feel weighed down by the responsibility that accompanies being the fulfillment of his parents' dream rather than his own. A youngest daughter may ruminate about whether or not her parents intended to raise a large brood and rue the impact of her birth on the family finances.

We remember God knew the prophet Jeremiah before he was formed in the womb ([Jer. 1:5](#)). Echoing Jeremiah's experience, the angel Gabriel's words provide a reminder that our lives are not initiated wholly by human effort and intention. God had specified the circumstances preceding Jesus' birth, and designed a plan that greatly affected Mary. Although the details rarely are readily apparent, God takes part in the unfolding of human existence from before the moment of

conception. This realization may extend solace to us, especially those of us who harbor guilt, regret, or disappointment.

The awareness that we are not fully in charge of our destiny ebbs and is revived repeatedly throughout our lives. Startling news—whether joyful or sorrowful—frequently evokes the question that Mary voiced when she was told that she was to bear a child who would be the "Son of the Most High," whom the Lord God would give both divine and royal authority: "How can this be?" A hospital patient may astonish his or her caregivers when a tumor shrinks or a precarious blood count is corrected, contrary to a bleak prognosis. Likewise, word that a friend has died suddenly may stir someone to exclaim, "How can this be? I just had lunch with him yesterday." A collective cry of anguish is raised when calamity or catastrophe befalls a neighborhood, community, or school. Mary's puzzlement grants us permission to take time to adjust to astonishing news, to question whether or not trials and tragedies, or God's magnificent promises, are for real, and to contemplate potential repercussions. The query "How can this be?" is a reverberating refrain that shapes our faith by reminding us, to paraphrase Augustine, how much is hidden from us. The exclamation of these four words may well signify the nearness of God.

The notion that anyone will receive a personal visit by a celestial being is improbable. Yet, in the manner of the angel Gabriel, persons whose authority or neediness seems too distressing to decline often recruit individuals for perplexing or difficult duties. When an employee is offered a daunting promotion, he or she, like Mary, is the "favored one," having attained a privileged position laden with responsibility that may stir a sense of unworthiness or unreadiness. Congregants elected to leadership offices, although flattered by their fellow church members' trust in them, confide insecurity, whispering, "Why was I chosen for this office? How can I possibly live up to everyone's confidence? How can this be?"

Sometimes opportunities are presented that convey seemingly unachievable expectations.

The angel Gabriel overturns Mary's hesitancy by explaining that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her. The angel then underscores God's incomprehensible capacity to accomplish wondrous aims by telling Mary that her relative Elizabeth had conceived a child at an advanced age, and explains, "For nothing will be impossible with God." This refrain conveys support, comfort, and courage for those confronting overwhelming expectations.

Mary's assignment from God is an honor yoked with struggle. In her day, an unmarried woman expecting a child was cause for disgrace. Nonetheless, her neighbors' prospective disdain does not hinder Mary's willingness to proceed according to God's entreaty. Her response to the annunciation is exemplary: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary comprehends that her life, and not only hers, but the whole world's, is about to be rearranged. She ascribes more credence to God's vision for the human community than to naysayers whose words suppress courage. Perhaps Mary's words deliver God's Christmas wish, that followers of Christ will believe that nothing is impossible with God and invite the Holy Spirit to work through us to attain miracles. **Ashley Cook Cleere**

Mary accepted her call. The angel Gabriel foretold how God would be in partnership with her to give birth to the Son of the Most High. What is God calling you to do? Will you say yes to the future that God foretell for you?

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