

## The Lord is with Us

### Luke 1:26-38

Our scripture is called the annunciation—the *announcement* of the incarnation by the angel Gabriel. In twelve verses, Mary is described as favored, perplexed, thoughtful, and afraid. She questions, believes, and submits to her vocation. A cursory perusal of artwork titled "The Annunciation" reveals Marys who are afraid, who are demure, who are assertive. Some show Mary and Gabriel talking as two old friends sharing a secret. Others show Mary sitting at Gabriel's feet in submission, agitated by the news he is sharing.

Theologians have traditionally depicted Mary as the model Christian believer, the unblemished representative of the church. Mary has the reputation of being in perfect sync with God, responding to God's command in absolute obedience. She is the "blessed one" who is called by God to bear the Christ child, the "servant of the Lord" who desires that God's will come to fruition, even in and through her. All agree that Mary is elected to a particular purpose in which she wholeheartedly participated.

Roman Catholic moral theologians understand Gabriel's greeting of "favored one" or "blessed one," as highlighting Mary's extraordinary nature. Mary is *unlike* other Christian believers insofar as she is sinless and because she is both mother and perpetual virgin. In Protestant theology, by contrast, the extraordinary thing about Mary is precisely her ordinariness—Mary is a member of the "priesthood of all believers" who emulates for all of us sinful, embodied saints the mysterious reality that we are integrally included in the work of God. Reformer John Calvin said Mary was "favored" but not

"worthy of praise." Rather, Gabriel recognized Mary as the *"happy one"* who has received "the undeserved love of God," who alone is to be adored.

### **Cynthia L. Rigby**

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 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. **Ashley**

### **Cook Cleere**

What do we make of Mary's response: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Did she doubt the words of Gabriel? In our age and culture that values freedom and autonomy, we wonder if Mary participated as a free and active agent in relation to the incarnation. When she proclaimed that she was "a servant of the Lord," was she resigning herself to functioning as a passive vessel in the work of God? Perhaps Mary's statement about her virginity does not reflect doubt as much as amazement at Gabriel's message in light of her own incapacity to conceive and give birth. Mary recognized what all Christian believers must recognize—that we, creatures before the Creator God, are incapable, in and of ourselves, of accomplishing God's will. We are all depraved; we are all, in this sense, virgins.

However, Gabriel reminds Mary that to be incapable of conceiving in and of ourselves is not the end of the story, that "nothing [is] impossible with God." The angel Gabriel underscored 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."

Mary's assignment from God was an honor yoked with struggle. In her day, an unmarried woman expecting a child was cause for disgrace. Nonetheless, her neighbors' disdain did not hinder Mary's willingness to proceed according to God's request. Mary acted freely when she offered herself as a servant of the Lord. She embraced her identity as the Mother of God, true to her calling. As the story unfolds, Mary acted as creative partner and agent with God in the coming of the Christ child. "The very same one" who was, in relation to his deity, "born from the Father before the ages" was, in relation to his humanity, "born in the last days from the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God."

In addition to inviting us to think about who we are and what we do in relation to God and God's work, this passage challenges us to be reoriented by what the incarnation tells us about the character of God. Gabriel arrives at a particular time ("in the sixth month" of Elizabeth's pregnancy), in a particular place ("a town in Galilee called Nazareth") to a particular woman ("a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph").

"God with us," known supremely in Jesus, barges in and meddles not only with our affairs, but with our very persons. God's call often *does* violate the selves we imagined ourselves to be—transforming us from "virgins" who are unable to bear God to the world, to creative agents for whom, with God, "nothing is impossible." **Cynthia L. Rigby**

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 understood that her life, and not only hers, but the whole world's, was about to be rearranged. She ascribed more credence to God's vision for the human community than to naysayers whose words suppress courage. Perhaps Mary's words delivered God's Christmas wish, that followers of Christ will believe that nothing is impossible with God, and invite the Holy Spirit to work through them to attain miracles. **Ashley Cook Cleere**

We too can rejoice with Mary as we welcome Jesus, the one that is "the Lord with Us," and allow that relationship to change us and change the world. Let it be so!

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