

“SURPRISE!”
LUKE 1:26-33
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
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Listen for the word of the Lord:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 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.'

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The preacher's trick, when well deployed, is to make you forget you're listening to a sermon. Maybe it's with a joke — a well placed laugh line to pull you back to a cleanly-articulated though frighteningly-dull theological point. Maybe it's an anecdote or a historical tidbit to relate past to future. If you've heard me preach before, you'll know my trick: childhood stories from my grandfather's farm. After all, there's very little that I can't make relevant to cows and a small-town hardware store.

Except, maybe, this. Turns out I've never seen an angel down in Due West, nor have I overheard the good news that a nearby towns person has been selected to bear the incarnate God in their womb. For this one I have neither a joke nor a story.

Only the scene as Luke gives it: righteous Mary, perplexed but agreeable, hears the announcement of the impending incarnation of God, and knowingly accepts her role in the divine drama.

But it's not only Luke's story I remember, is it? For this text we have a millennia of artistic interpretation. "The Annunciation," as it is known, was a common subject for artists in ancient, medieval and Renaissance periods. And I have to admit that when I remember this scene, I remember it with the artists, my imagination filled with their colors.

It shouldn't be hard to call to mind, try to picture it if you can: in just about every rendering Mary appears unfazed by the spectacle — her head is slightly bent, a sign of deference to the angel who suddenly appeared in her room, she wears a crown of light atop her head — a radiant circle that reminds us of her holiness — and she is alone.

And from the time of the 14th century, when Leonardo da Vinci added the detail, she is depicted in proximity to white lilies— a sign of her purity.

We know the scene well. We've heard it. We've seen it. We've sung it, "The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came"! So what is there to be said on this first Sunday of Advent that hasn't been said before? The Lord was with her, and she a perfect disciple — after all she already had her crown of light at the ready, and perfect white lilies set on her table! Who among us can measure up to Mary?

But then again I wonder if our memories are a bit out of joint when it comes to Mother Mary. I wonder if we remember the frescos more than the Scripture.

Consider again the story as Luke tells it —

Mary doesn't even get her own timeline. Her story is measured by her cousin Elizabeth's improbable pregnancy. Indeed six months after Elizabeth had her divine confrontation, we find ourselves zeroed in on Nazareth, a town well known to those of us who have been told the story time and again, but otherwise utterly inconsequential. Nazareth was no Rome. Nazareth was no Jerusalem. Heck Nazareth wasn't even Greenville — it was not on anyone's top 10 under-rated destination lists, not a first look for small businesses.

It was like Due West. If you know it, you know it, and everybody there knows you. Otherwise it was just some stop on some line. Little ole Nazareth, west of nowhere, where there happened to be a young woman named Mary.

About her we know almost nothing else, which matters, because Luke cares mightily about who your folks are. Even this early in Luke's narrative we've met both Elizabeth and Zechariah, and been given narrative detail about their lineage — Elizabeth a descendant of saintly Aaron and Zechariah a priest of Abjiah. But about Mary we hear nothing. Sure, she is betrothed to a descendant of David, but there is nothing further to recommend *her* to history.

Even Luke, when he goes on to give his genealogy of Jesus in chapter three, forgets to mention Mary. There's simply nothing extraordinary about her.

Alongside the artists, we remember her with a halo, but she was just another girl, betrothed to a boy, in a nowhere town. Until, that is, Gabriel shows up, at which point she is just another girl engaged to a boy in a nowhere town who happens to also be "much perplexed."

Much perplexed. Does that resonate with y'all? Boy, it does with me — it is no understatement to say I've spent the past two years, if not 37, in a state similar to Mary's. "Much perplexed" by one thing or another.

Which, for Mary, is understandable. Where only moments before there was a familiar room, empty but for Mary, now there stands an unmistakably divine presence — Gabriel, God’s favored messenger, greeting her as if she *was* somebody, calling Mary “favored,” a moniker for a queen.

It’s perplexing, right?

But here’s where I want you to pay attention to timing, because this, I think, is what makes the difference for modern-day disciples. Mary hasn’t even gotten the big news yet. We know something she does not, that this angel is here to announce that she has been chosen to gestate God. She hasn’t been given the spiel about the child growing in her womb, hasn’t heard that he will be a King like David, that he is a God from God.

She is much perplexed,
bewildered,
bamboozled,
befuddled,
and plain confused not by the announcement of the pregnancy, but by the announcement that in her, a woman without a place, without a lineage, without a dollar, the Most High God has found favor.

Let me say it again. What perplexes Mary is not that she is pregnant — though that will require some explanation — it’s that God has chosen her, that she — west of nowhere, from a lineage of nobodies — is favored. Indeed, when Gabriel tells her not to be afraid, he is not speaking of her pregnancy (not yet!), he is speaking of the sudden revelation of God in her life.

Mary is perplexed at God’s presence. After all, shouldn’t the God who spun the universe, set the world on its axis, the God who called creation into being, appear first to kings and wise men, the kind of folks whom history remembers? What could God want with just another kid from just another town, a woman who holds less political capital than a Due West town councilman and less power than a kid running around a farm trying to ride a donkey.

It is not an understatement to say that this is the best known story in the world, or that it changed the course of history. Surely this Advent season part of our task is to remember the story with awe, to carry it down from generation-to-generation. But the challenge remains — what does Mary, full of grace, favored in God’s sight, mean for *us today*?

Well, I can tell you what it doesn’t mean.

We’ve twisted ourselves into knots arguing about the immaculate conception. On one side we have a reminder that interpretation is based on translation: the passages we read today call back to prophecies in Isaiah, where the Hebrew reads that a “young maiden” will conceive and give birth to a son. Virginity in Isaiah’s context is irrelevant.

However, in the third century BCE, when Greek Rabbis translated the Hebrew Old Testament for common usage, they chose a Greek world that emphasized not the age of the woman, but her “purity” so to speak, such that when Greek-speaking Luke quotes Isaiah, he quotes the latter meaning, drawing a millennia of attention to Mary’s peculiar conception.

But is Advent about the logistics of Mary’s conception? The God who created the world has done stranger things, worked through odder circumstances, and speculating about Mary’s past history seems to miss the point. Mary’s God — our God — does wild things, and is known to create life where there was none, create hope where there was none, draw breath where there was none.

No, though there are miracles a’plenty in Luke’s text, the wonder of Advent today is not about a doctrine of Immaculate Conception.

Likewise I don’t think this text should draw us to focus on the perfections of Mary, as if she is better prepared for God’s choosing than we. We do not read in Luke that Mary was more morally upright than anyone else, or more intelligent — she was not the strongest, the greatest, or the best. She was not closer to God than you or me.

She was just Mary, and it just so happens (perhaps for no good reason), she was called and chosen by the God of Israel to bear divinity into the world.

And that’s the crux of it, that’s why the Annunciation speaks to a kid on a farm in Due West, a preacher in a pulpit in Greenville, or anyone in between: because the good news of the Gospel is that God has no good reason to choose us either,

but that’s never stopped God before.

God choose Mary. God called Mary. In the Annunciation, when God laid out God’s wild plans for this lowly woman, God also sought her “yes.” And with only some perplexity, despite the obvious hurdles, Mary offered God her very self. Right there in verse 38: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

What is Advent for we who wait with Mary? It is an opportunity — an opportunity today to both prepare the world for the return of the Messiah *and*, paradoxically, to bear that Messiah into the world each day of our lives. It is an opportunity to reflect on God’s miraculous choosing of *us*, an opportunity offer the yes of our lives to the God who *still* seeks communion with us and with the world through us. It is an opportunity to practice discipleship, to offer our full selves — despite obvious hurdles — we aren’t the strongest, the holiest, the smartest — to God’s wild plans.

We are not Mary. It is not ours to carry the Messiah, to nurse him, wean him, watch him grow, to mourn with him and for him, to rejoice with him and for him. But that does not mean we are not called, by the power of the Spirit, to make that very-same God incarnate in all of our living, to say yes to God’s wild, wonderful plans; to accept — like it

or not — that we are favored, called, made a family with one another and with the divine.

Because why not?

God calls us (even us!), to prepare the way, to accept the yoke, to walk along the way, and that's why Advent matters.

“We are all meant to be mothers of God,” wrote Meister Eckhart in the 14th century, “What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within 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? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.”

What good does it do us, Westminster, if Mary is only a memory, a distant story that changed the world but not our lives? What good is it to Greenville if she embodies some perfection we could never reach?

Indeed the good is in the *choosing*, the “yes” to gestating and manifesting Jesus Christ in all of our living. The gift of the God descending to humanity, even to us, that we might truly live, and that we might bear Christ into the world by our words, our actions, our humility, our love. Mary's lowly yes should ring in our hearts. It should inspire all of our “yes”es to bring Christ into our weary world.

“Here we are, servants of the Lord; let it be with us according to your word.”

It's perplexing, isn't it. God chooses you. There's no angel, but the Spirit stands and calls: “Greetings, favored church. The Lord is with you.”

Give yourself a moment to absorb the shock. Befuddlement is understandable but it shouldn't stop you.

The Lord is with you.

Go do something about it.