

The Lord's Servant

Why Mary?

God had told the world since the time of the prophets, “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” That’s what Isaiah announced to the people of Israel centuries ago; this inconceivable conceiving would be God’s sign: a virgin conceiving and bearing a son.

Now, centuries later, there had been no such sign seen. But then, maybe 15 or sixteen years before time would be changed forever, when B.C. would become A.D., a little baby girl was born. Her parents called her Mary. It was right up there on the list of most popular girl’s names of 15 B.C.

Mary grew up, I imagine, living with her parents in a little town called Nazareth. Learning whatever skills girls needed to learn in what would soon become first century Israel. She learned how to play nice, to care for children, to prepare meals and keep things clean. She had her teenager dreams. She found her teenage dream match in a man named Joseph, a little older than she. Maybe the matchmaker helped make that happen. Maybe the matchmaker was God.

And then one morning, this ordinary girl's life was no longer ordinary. Why Mary? Why after all of these centuries did Isaiah's prophecy about a virgin giving birth to a son begin to play out on God's stage?

It was perhaps a morning like most others. She lay in bed, waking to the sound of the town's roosters. Just a minute more in bed. (You know teenagers and mornings do not mix, right?) Earlier that morning though God spoke to one of his angels, Gabriel. God said to him, "Gabriel, today is the day. Go to Mary in Nazareth and tell her that I have chosen her to be that virgin to bear the Son of God, the Savior of her people and all people who believe."

Now, if you are an angel of the Most High, I don't imagine you ask questions. But it doesn't mean you don't think them. I wonder if Gabriel wondered, 'Why Mary?' She seems so, well, ordinary. And she was. That is one of the answers to the 'why Mary' question. God needed someone just like you and me, ordinary, unsuspecting folks who might or might not say 'yes' to God.

Gabriel transports from outside time to inside time, from outside space to inside space, inside Mary's room, and he announces himself to the sleepy girl, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Luke tells us that “Mary was greatly troubled...and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” I love this artist’s vision of the scene: Mary scrunched up against the wall, leaning back and looking at this man in her bedroom. ‘Greatly troubled’ indeed.

Then, in what must be the first line they teach angels in angel school, Gabriel says, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You are to conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and...’ I imagine that as Gabriel goes on to describe what her baby will be, Mary’s mind stopped hearing and started going a million miles in the other direction.

All the while Gabriel is talking Mary is anything but ‘not afraid’. Her mind got stuck on the ‘conceive and give birth’ part. Her response is classic: “How can this be?” Mary’s question wasn’t a ‘why me’, but a ‘how can it be?’

This was probably not a part of the script for the day. Or perhaps it was. Frederick Buechner imagines Mary was probably too dazzled to notice, but maybe just beneath his wings and bright garments even Gabriel was trembling a little in nervous anticipation at how this encounter was going to go.

And, as Scott Hoezee writes, “the whole cosmos, all the hosts of heaven from the archangel Gabriel on down, are holding their collective breath and

sitting on the edges of their seats.” This is one of those moments when the fact that angels are not God is so important for us to remember. Gabriel didn’t know what was next. He just probably assumed that if someone is asked to do be a servant of God that they will jump out of bed and say ‘when do we start?’

But Mary asked a question that didn’t seem to have an answer. Except that Gabriel was an old pro. God sent the ‘A’ team for this mission. Gabriel may not know the exact science involved, because of course science doesn’t have an answer. But Gabriel knew the Message-Giver, and so Gabriel, with maybe a little pause while he collects his thoughts, says: “The Holy Spirit...the power of the Most High...” Meaning, of course, I don’t know how this can be, Mary, but God will make it happen.

How does Gabriel know this? Because Gabriel has had a front row seat from the time of Creation forward and what Gabriel learned is what he says next, “For no word of God will ever fail.”

And now history waited. Waited for the virgin’s answer. The famous song asks “Mary Did You Know?” And in whatever time it took, 30 seconds or 30 minutes, Mary didn’t know. She didn’t know what this meant for her life, the joy

of raising the world's only truly perfect child. The disappointment of having a son who was born to die before she did. Mary didn't know any of that.

What Mary knew is that she was afraid. What Mary knew is that what this man, or was it really an angel, in her room, what he was saying was nonsense. I imagine that she straightened up in bed. She smoothed out her night clothes. She wiped away her tears and her sniffles. And then she began to move her form her answer with her youthful mouth.

Scott Hoezee gives us this great image of parents watching children getting ready to say their Christmas program piece. They look at their child and silently mouth the words that they had practiced with their little ones. He imagines that perhaps that is what it was like for Gabriel and the assembled angels peering over the edge of heaven, looking at this most critical moment in the human drama we know as the story of salvation.

The Baby Jesus needed a human mother. The whole future of the salvation of humankind depends on her answer. So Gabriel mouths with Mary as she says, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Mary's didn't know. She said yes anyway. That's the Big Idea for today friends. Why Mary? Because she, a most ordinary girl, asked to do something no

other woman in all of history had been or ever would be asked to do, got past her questions, her fear, her wonder, and she said 'Yes'.

What news is God breathing into your life today? If your question is 'how can this be?', that is alright. Mary asked that question too. And she was 'highly favored', blessed, chosen. As are you, child of God. And you have questions too, right? You are telling me that God still does the impossible? That the God who asked Mary to make room for Jesus in her womb is asking the impossible of me too?

Maybe. I of course do not know the mind of God, but if God has it in mind to bring some invitation, some miracle into your life this Christmas, are you ready for it? Perhaps that miracle is one of faith, that you who doubt will believe that Jesus is real, is really God.

Ask your questions, 'how can this be?', but then follow Mary's journey as she says, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Whatever it is that God is asking you to do with your life as an active of service to God, can you get past the act of questioning to the act of submission to the will of God?

Mary wasn't ready to have a baby. This was not the news a young, unmarried girl wants to hear. But she heard it and she said, I will submit to the

will of God. The request that God has for you, the one that will change your mind, your body, your life, may be for you to do a task for which you feel totally unprepared, but it is what God has chosen for you. Why you? Why Mary?



Because, before the beginning of time, God chose different people for different tasks, all designed to build up the salvation story and bring it to its glorious conclusion, for which we still await. The story is not yet done.

And here's some reassurance for you. God actually does the hard work. God sends his Spirit over Mary, enveloping her with the presence of God to place Jesus in her womb. That is how, in some mysterious way, God filled the room Mary had agreed to offer for Jesus. I don't know how this happens. No one does. That is why it's a mystery.

Just like I believe God sent to Mary this invitation to be mother to the Incarnate One, I believe that God is preparing an invitation for your life. You won't see Gabriel at your bedside, but you will hear God's invitation. Say yes to God's invitation to being God's servant. Open your mind, your heart, your body, to let the glory of God enter in and to work its way through you into the world.

And then may you be able to sing, as Mary did, her song of praise. (Magnificat)