

Luke 1:26-38

New Revised Standard Version

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 forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.

This is the Christmas story. The angel Gabriel is telling Mary she is going to have a baby who will be the son of God. Mary will be the mother of the Only Begotten of God. Her Son will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end. There is a funny part in the movie Talladega Nights where Ricky Bobby prays to 8 lb, 6 oz baby Jesus. Advent prepares us for this great inversion. God comes to Earth in the form of a human baby. I have a vivid picture in my mind of our now 16 year old daughter Madeleine when she was a baby. She was screaming what seemed like at the top of her lungs and her daddy was just holding her. At Christmas the ruler of the cosmos comes to earth trapped in a squalling package of helpless flesh.

But before we get to Christmas Day we have the annunciation where the angel Gabriel announces to Mary what is going to happen. Imagine a thirteen-year-old from an extremely poor family being greeted by an angel of God. Gabriel tells her she is full of grace, Gabriel calls her favored one. To be favored is to receive the undeserved love of God. Mary isn't described as extraordinarily holy. Gabriel doesn't say she is a favored one because she has been chosen. Mary is a regular person. She could be any number of teens we see day in and day out struggling for acceptance.

God breaks into ordinary lives, but also lives without hope and lives that haven't been valued. "Greetings, favored one!" We can infer how Mary might have felt, but we don't really know. Mary teaches me that God wants humans to be a part of God saving the world. When God sends Gabriel to have this conversation with Mary, it draws Mary and all of us into what God is doing. We don't know what would have happened if Mary would have said, "No, thank you," and before Mary agrees to be a part of what God is doing she has some questions.

Mary asks, "How can this be?" I have asked that question a lot in my life. I have asked that question when a healthy friend shared with me about her cancer diagnosis. I have asked that question when I heard about the execution of Brandon Bernard who was 18 when the crime was committed. I asked that question when George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and so many others were murdered. How can this be? I asked that question when a friend shared with me about her eating disorder and another friend shared about his unhappiness in his marriage. How can this be? I don't understand why or how bad stuff happens and I don't believe that God causes it to happen, but in and through it God breaks into our lives reminding us that we are not alone.

We have the advantage of knowing what is next for Mary, but Mary does not know why an angel would disrupt the normal course of her life with the simple words, "Greetings favored

one! The Lord is with you.” Mary had a choice. Yes, the angel Gabriel announces the impending birth of Jesus, but Mary did have a choice. The angel Gabriel is holding out an unknown life to her and Mary can say yes or no. It might be that if Mary had said no, there wouldn’t have been any more angel visits. If we say yes, like Mary did, then we know that there is no script and there are no guarantees. There is a song you hear at Christmastime called, “Mary, did you know?” Obviously, Mary did know because Gabriel told her, but Mary didn’t know what life would look like for her after she said yes. We don’t either. If we say yes to God, we are inviting God to come into the ordinariness of our lives. The angel’s response to Mary’s question of, “How can this be?” is to tell her about her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant. The angel Gabriel says, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

We have had these forty days of counting down to Christmas. Forty days to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ both as a baby born in Bethlehem and the coming of the Christ at the end of the time. We have talked about how God is with us and yet, our world is not yet how God wants it to be. We have reality and possibility. We have our selfishness, our racism, our individualism, our lack of neighborliness, injustice, all of it. And then we have God’s vision.

We live between two worlds – the world as it is and the world as it should be. May we celebrate that God came to be with us once, and God is still with us, and God is coming again to set all things right. This has been a year of loss, of grief, of longing, of questions and doubts. It has felt like a dark night for many of us. I love the Longest Night service that our Perkins Intern Chris will be hosting on December 21 at 7:00 p.m. It is an opportunity for us to gather together to remember lost loved ones, and for us to be together as we struggle with depression during this holiday season. It is an opportunity for us to name what is and feel God meeting us there.

Anne Lamott wrote a book after the tragedy at Sandy Hook elementary school. It is called *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*. She said that she was trying to make sense of such a senseless tragedy. She says in that book, “There can be meaning without things making sense.” I want to share the definition of hope that Anne Lamott shares in that book. She says, “Every time we choose the good action or response, the decent, the valuable, it builds, incrementally, to renewal, resurrection, the place of newness, freedom, justice. The equation is: life, death, resurrection, hope. The horror is real, and so you make casseroles for your neighbor, organize an overseas clothing drive, and do your laundry. You can also offer to do other people’s laundry, if they have recently had any random babies or surgeries. We live stitch by stitch, when we’re lucky. If you fixate on the big picture, the whole shebang, the overview, you miss the stitching. And maybe the stitching is crude, or is unraveling, but if it was precise, we’d pretend that life is just fine and running like a Swiss watch. This is not helpful if on the inside our understanding is that life is more often the cuckoo clock with rusty gears.”

Then Anne Lamott shares a story her pastor, Veronica, shared one Sunday of a sparrow lying in the street with its legs straight up in the air, sweating a little under its feathery arms. A warhorse walks up to the bird and asks, ‘What on earth are you doing?’ The sparrow replies, ‘I heard the sky was falling, and I wanted to help.’ The horse laughs a big, loud, sneering horse laugh, and says, ‘do you really think you are going to hold back the sky, with those scrawny little legs?’ And the sparrow says, ‘One does what one can.’”

When I hear the angel Gabriel tell Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God,” I think of that story. I think of a sparrow with its legs straight up in the air, that is utterly at risk and vulnerable. We have to do what we can and trust God to do the rest. Saying yes to God leads us to utter risk and vulnerability.

Did you see the story last week about a Dairy Queen in Minnesota where the drive-thru customers had a chain of kindness where nearly 1,000 cars paid for the next person's meal?<sup>1</sup> It started on December 3 when a man paid for the order behind him. The second car asked why the first car had done that. The driver said, "Really? Why would they do that?" The Dairy Queen general manager said every once in a while someone will take care of the person behind them. That second car kept it going and by closing time there was \$10 left over to put toward orders the next morning. Then someone called to donate an additional \$80 to help kick things off even further on Friday. The general manager of the Dairy Queen said one person was so excited they gave them a \$20 bill almost in tears. They asked, "Are you serious? This is really going on?" At this point they were 125 cars that had paid it forward. When people in the town heard what was going on, they stopped by because they wanted to take part. One person said it helped restore their faith in humanity. Pure kindness is a breath of fresh air. When all was said and done, more than \$10,000 in orders had been paid for. The chain of kindness lasted for two days. Christmas flips all of our expectations on their head and reminds us that nothing is impossible with God.

Right now, it feels as if our world has turned upside-down already, and we have had plenty of not joyful moments. But, Christmas reminds us to always have hope because when the world is out of sorts, Christ comes to be God with us. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://people.com/human-interest/dairy-queen-customers-pay-it-forward-chain-kindness/>