

The Angel's Message Luke 1:26-38

Long ago, in a remote corner of the earth, God broke into our world through the voice of an angel named Gabriel. Gabriel came to a young woman named Mary.

As was the custom of the day, Mary's parents made all the arrangements for her marriage. At the proper age she would marry Joseph the local carpenter. The negotiations were made between Mary's parents and Joseph's parents with the couple having no say in the matter.

Since Nazareth was a small village Mary probably knew Joseph quite well. Perhaps, she had seen him working in his carpenter's shop.

Then came the day when Mary and Joseph were betrothed to each other. Betrothal was for a period of one year and was as binding as marriage. It was so official that, during this year, if Joseph died, Mary would be considered a widow.

One day as Mary was daydreaming about her marriage to Joseph, she looked up and saw an angel standing before her. She was startled and frightened. Mary never in a million years dreamed of being visited by an angel. Let's listen in.

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Gabriel said to a frightened Mary. What an unusual way to begin. **"You who are highly favored."**

Why, Mary was just an ordinary girl, barely a teenager. There was nothing special about her that we know of. She didn't come from a wealthy family. She wasn't listed in the society pages of the Nazareth times. No one outside of Nazareth had ever heard of her. She was just your average young woman.

Mary was perplexed and confused. Gabriel sensed Mary's fear. He tried to comfort her, **"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."** Mary didn't realize it at the time, but God had chosen her for a very special purpose. **"You will conceive and give birth to a son,"** said Gabriel, **"and you are to call him Jesus."** Mary was mystified. What could this all mean?

Mary listened to the angel's words. **"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."**

Mary's response was one of bewilderment—particularly with her role in this amazing drama. **"How can this be?"** she asked the divine messenger, **"since I am a virgin?"**

Gabriel answered, **"The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."**

To satisfy her confusion about bearing a child and yet being a virgin Gabriel reminded her that her cousin, Elizabeth, was far past the child-bearing age, but she was six months pregnant. This was God's doing, the angel told her, for nothing is impossible with God.

That was all it took for Mary to be convinced. **"I am the Lord's servant,"** Mary answered. **"May your word to me be fulfilled."** Then Gabriel left her.

But Mary believed Gabriel's message. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Although we know very little about Mary and her family, we can assume that she was a devout Jewish girl who had listened and believed the scripture lessons read at the local synagogue.

Although she was certainly startled by the appearance of an angel, his words didn't seem foreign to her. Deep in her heart she believed that one day the Messiah would come. She just never realized that she would be chosen to play a part in the Messiah's birth.

It's a beautiful, sacred story to the 2.5 billion people on this earth who call themselves Christians. That's approximately 1 out of every 3 people on earth. What an amazing impact Mary's baby has had on the world. There are some elements to the story of the first Christmas that will live forever in our hearts.

First of all, **we see a young woman's obedience to God.** "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

We Protestants accuse our Catholic friends of making too much of Mary. Catholics, in turn, accuse Protestants of making too little of Mary. They have a point.

When a pastor asked a class of boys and girls, "Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?" a boy in the class raised his hand and replied, "Because his mother was there. "Obedience," wrote C. S. Lewis, "is the key to all doors." Certainly without the obedience of a young woman named Mary we would not have the story of Christmas.

The second element that endears the Christmas story to us is how God chose to work to accomplish His mission. He chose to work through the least and the lowest of people and places—reminding us of our responsibilities to the least and lowest as well.

Many of the deprived and outcast of this world identify in a special way with the Christ child who lay in a feeding trough for a bed and was attended by shepherds, donkeys, and cattle. Everything about Christ's birth affirms God's love for the least and the lowest.

Galilee, the region where Christ grew up, was sort of an Appalachia of its day—up in the hills, and a bit backward compared with Judea.

Nazareth, the village that Mary and Joseph called home, had such a poor reputation that in John 1:46 Nathaniel sums up its disrepute like this: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

And Bethlehem, where Christ was born, wasn't Jerusalem or Rome. Bethlehem was no teeming metropolis, just a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Plenty of cattle and shepherds and straw, but not much else. And because of the crowds, no room for Mary in the inn. Humble in all respects.

I wonder how Mary and Joseph would have felt back then in the humble town of Bethlehem if they could have seen today and the extravagant Christmas celebrations we hold each year.

Finally, and most important, is the recognition that **Christmas is the celebration of God's greatest gift to humanity—His own Son.** The tradition of giving gifts at Christmas is tied to the story of the Magi giving gifts to baby Jesus. But the far greater gift at Christmas time is the gift of Jesus himself. "For God so loved the world," John writes, "that He gave His only Son . . ." There is no greater gift than that.