

## “Now heaven and earth wait.”

**W**hat we’ve just heard, in our gospel reading, is what’s become known as The Annunciation; it’s the Gospel of Luke’s description of how the angel Gabriel informs Mary of what God has in mind for the world, and attempts to recruit Mary to be a part of that whole plan. It all seems pretty straightforward; however, let’s listen again to a part of what Gabriel said:

“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.”

Now, the way Luke phrases the angel’s statement makes it sound like it’s a done deal, doesn’t it? But that can’t be the case, or else what Luke is describing would be less of an annunciation and more of a highjacking. So, maybe we’re dealing with an awkward translation, because the larger context makes still it clear that this is just a proposal; Gabriel is on a sales trip; he wants to sign up Mary for the cause. However, Mary isn’t being recruited simply to be another member of the team; basically, Mary *is* the team!

Now, let’s pause for a moment, and think about that. In order for God’s grand idea to work, an unmarried teenage girl— whose age has been speculated to be anywhere from 12 to 16 years— from an insignificant little village has to make the decision to put her life in jeopardy— in *jeopardy*, because, in those days, good things didn’t usually happen to unmarried pregnant girls— and to do so based upon a vision— a *vision!*— of an angel who tells her that God wants her to conceive and bear His child.

Think about that for a moment. Does it sound like a well-thought-out plan? Does this even seem like a good idea?

Personally, I think this story lacks credibility for at least two reasons. First of all, Peggy and I raised two daughters, and there were times when we had a hard time getting them to keep their bedrooms clean, so you can forget about conceiving and bearing the child of God! But the second reason I think this story lacks credibility is because ... well, it’s not the way I would have done it!

For example, why kick things off in some rinky-dink town when Jerusalem— the political and religious capital of the country— is just a few miles away? Wouldn’t Jerusalem have been a better launch point?

And for another thing, why approach some poor, unknown, unmarried teenage girl and ask her to be the mother? Wouldn't a more mature woman from a prominent and wealthy family have done a better job of providing for and raising the Son of God? I think so!

And, finally, why send an angel to deliver such an important message? For something as really big as this, God should have handled it in person— like he did with Moses on Mt. Sinai. Right? This has got to be at least as important as that!

So, I have some problems with this story. However, having said all that, I do have to acknowledge that, if the witness of scripture and history have shown us anything, it's that God does some of his best work in the most ordinary of places, and through the most ordinary of people. And maybe that's the point, because:

If you never thought that God could work through someone who was a pagan idol-worshiper, then you've never heard of Gideon.

If you never thought that God could work through someone who was a foreigner and a prostitute, then you've never heard of Rahab.

If you never thought that God could work through someone who was a murderer and an adulterer, then you've never heard of David.

If you never thought that God could work through someone who was a womanizing drunk, then you've never heard of Samson.

If if you never thought that God could work through someone who was a narrow-minded bigot, then you've never heard of St. Paul.

The fact is, scripture shows us, over and over again, is that there is practically no one God cannot, and will not, work through. And each year, as Christmas approaches, we're reminded that God can even work through an unwed pregnant teenage girl, and her baby.

But thinking back on our gospel reading, isn't Mary's reaction interesting? There's no awe or amazement; it's simply a very human response of uncertainty, "How can this be?"

I'm reminded of the old folk tale that describes how, after Gabriel gave Mary the announcement, but before her decision, there ensued this long silence. And in that silence all the suns and planets and stars in the heavens ceased their movement.

And well they might, because this was not an insignificant request, and in order for things to work out, there needed to be a lot of faith at work. Clearly, Mary needed a lot of faith in God to be used in this way. But God also needed to have faith in Mary, that she'd stay the course.

But Mary's response, when it came, was simply this:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

And according to that old folk tale I mentioned a moment ago, when Mary finally agreed, the universe once again resumed its motion.

Sometimes, when I read this account, I'm reminded of the fact that it wasn't Mary who initiated this encounter; rather, it was God, through Gabriel. And then I think about the fact that, through the countless centuries that preceded and followed the events described in our gospel reading, that countless other people have been waiting, and praying, and hoping for their own tangible encounter with God. And throughout it all, the irony is that they probably had that encounter with God— quite possibly many times— but they just didn't have the eyes to see it.

I mean, think again about that list of unlikely people I mentioned a few minutes ago, whom God worked through: if God could work through a pagan idol-worshiper, or a foreigner and a prostitute, or a murderer and an adulterer, or a womanizing drunk, or through a narrow-minded bigot, or an unwed pregnant teenager— if God has worked through such people at various times in the past, couldn't he, wouldn't he, do the same today? Absolutely! And, what is more, as the parable in Matthew 25 tells us, God also appears to us through the sick, through those in prison, through those who are hungry, and through those who are homeless. We simply need the eyes of faith to see him.

So, here's the thing: Through the archangel Gabriel, God said to Mary, “Will you help me?” However, through so many other people, God says to us, “Will you help me?” And, like Mary, perhaps we're puzzled as well, not really understanding what's going on. And just as all the suns, planets, and stars paused, waiting for Mary's response, God waits for a response from each of us as well.

And so, when this worship service is concluded, and you go back out into the world: May God grant you the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to feel your encounter with God, and not just in every thing, or in every place, but also in every person; even the most unlikely. Amen.