

“Behold”  
Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:46-55;  
Luke 1:26-38

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What was Mary thinking? What was Mary thinking when she encountered that messenger from God, an angel? The angel assumed that she was afraid. He said, “Don’t be afraid.” The text said she was perplexed. That’s an interesting reaction to having an angel before you. I think I would be afraid, but it said she was perplexed, wondering why this was happening, perhaps. What was going on?

So they have this interaction, with the angel announcing what’s going to happen. Mary’s response is not the same as Moses’s response—Not me! Her response is simply, “How is this going to happen?” It seems like a very practical kind of response: OK, now how is it going to go forward? I haven’t had any relations with men, so how is this going to happen? He tells her how it’s going to happen and she says, “All right. Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word, the will of God.”

It’s an incredible interaction. In it we see Mary as fairly practical, it seems to me. Perplexed by this encounter and then just simply wanting to know what the next step is. We don’t hear any of the other things that might have been said. If an angel had announced something like that to me, I would want to know why God picked me, what was it really all about. I could think of all kinds of questions I would want to ask, not just “What’s the next step?” Yet that seems to be what Mary does. She is very practical, full of faith to take the next step.

We are left wondering at this encounter. Remember, Mary is probably very young, probably very poor, not somebody you might expect an angel to come to, not somebody you would expect a king to be born to. You expect that to happen to royalty. In fact, if you’ve seen the Charles Dickens’ play, “A Christmas Carol,” if Scrooge would have heard about her having a child, he would have said it’s just more of the surplus population. Yet, here’s this child that’s coming. As a parent, we are always extremely excited about a child coming. But there are the Scrooges around who don’t see it quite that way.

This picture of Mary encountering the angel is a picture painted for us. It’s a fairly incredible picture. Certainly not exactly where we might expect God to work—not without reading the rest of the New Testament, anyway. We wouldn’t expect this to happen. We’re not sure what Mary thinks about it, or we wouldn’t if we weren’t able to read on a little further to the Magnificat. What we call the Magnificat is where Mary says, “My soul will glorify the Lord.” The word “glorify” means she wants to bring something to light. We think about magnifying something as bring it out to see it better. I think she understands something and she wants to note it. She recognizes that we expect the good things to come all wrapped in a special way. I think she sees herself as pretty plain. She doesn’t have any of the trappings that would go along with one to whom a king would be born.

So she goes on to say, “I have found favor.” She knows it’s not because she’s wrapped all nice and pretty. She’s not royalty. She doesn’t have high status. She doesn’t have a lot of power. In fact, in her position as a young woman in Palestine 2,000 years ago she is about at the bottom of the power structure. So she recognizes God is doing something when he comes to her, and she says not only has God found it within God’s grace to lift her up, but she seems to recognize that as God lifts her up, what he is doing in her is a metaphor, a way of describing what God is doing for the lowly. Lifting the lowly up. Showing mercy. Showing that the lowly will be blessed.

In fact she goes on to say that God scatters the imagination of the proud in their hearts. She recognizes that in pride we begin to set up our expectations of ourselves as something greater than we are, and that doesn’t lead us to life, but scatters us. Instead she says it is those who come in fear of God that are lifted up. By “fear” she’s not describing being afraid of God, she’s talking about those who come in reverence and respect, with a desire to worship God. She’s saying it’s not what the package looks like, it’s what comes out of it; it’s what’s inside of it. She recognizes it is those who fear God, who recognize the awe and wonder, who revere and respect, and who are willing to come and worship God, that God notices and blesses. This isn’t just for her. She recognizes that, and says from generation to generation, from a thousand years before her to a thousand years, even two thousand years after her, she knows that it is that when we come in awe, reverence, and respect, God comes to us. There is in her this ode she gives to the wonder of who God is and what God does. It is a recognition of God coming and valuing us, not because of our worldly value, but because of the relationship we have with God as children of God.

I think that recognition she has continues to point to that kind of great reversal that we hear so often in the New Testament. It’s not about all the trappings of the world around us, but it’s the nature of our relationship with God—one of awe, respect, worship, reverence. But Mary’s ability to accept that, indeed to say, “Here I am, take the next step,” feels challenging to me. Encountering God and simply saying, “What’s the next step?” is not an easy thing for me to hear. I’m not sure I always want that. It’s easy to want what the world wants, and yet what she is offering us is what we hear in that Romans passage today: the secret of long ages given to us.

So again we have the two packages: the world’s secrets, or what God has for us. It feels like that passage suggests a bit of what that secret is about and how it’s been hidden for long ages. You see, God loves everyone. So it goes on to say that it’s now revealed, even to all the Gentiles. Part of the reason I think it’s hidden is because we tend not to look at the thing that looks plain. We want to look at the things that make us look special. God wants us to know that we all are loved by God and that God is inviting all of us to know the grace of Christ.

So Romans goes on to say that the only wise God, the one who really knows the way things are, who loves the world, will bring about the obedience of faith through the revelation of what’s inside, of Christ’s coming.

I don't know about you, but I always have a little struggle with obedience, so I looked again at what this word means. It means basically that now I have seen what is real and want to align myself with it. I have something I can trust, and now I'm going to act on that trust. That is the obedience of faith.

So Mary beholds God's coming through the angel telling her what will happen, and she recognizes what that means, what it means for all of us. The wonder of God comes in unexpected ways to grow among us and offer us the fullness of God's grace and the wonder of God's power. Don't miss it. It sometimes comes in simple ways, like a baby's birth.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, this is an incredible story of Mary hearing you, responding to you, recognizing what you're about. Sometimes it feels hard for us to do the same, to recognize your word to us, to respond to it, and to see what you are about. Help us recognize not only the birth of Christ and the wonder of his entry into our world, but help us recognize how you enter into our daily lives, how your grace is present, how you would lead us to know that grace. Help us say, "Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me as you would do." Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.