

*“Now heaven and earth wait.”*

**W**hat we’ve just heard, in our gospel reading, is what’s 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 scheme. Listen again to the words of Gabriel:

“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.”

Now, the way Luke phrases the angel’s statement makes it sound like a *fait accompli* – a done deal, or an accomplished fact – but that can’t be the case, or else what Luke is describing would be less of an annunciation and more of a highjacking. No, this is just a proposal; Gabriel is on a sales trip to sign up Mary for the course. However, Mary isn’t being recruited simply to be another member of the team; she *is* the team!

Now, let’s pause for a moment, and think about that. For this grand idea to work, an unmarried teenage girl from the backwater village of Nazareth has to make the decision to put her life in jeopardy (because, in those days, good things didn’t usually happen to unmarried pregnant girls) based upon a vision – a *vision!* – of an angel who tells her that God wants her to conceive and bear His child. Does this sound like a well-thought-out plan? Does this seem like a good idea?

If I may be honest with you, I think this story lacks credibility for at least two reasons. First, Peggy and I have raised two daughters, and we had a hard time getting them to keep their bedrooms clean, so you can forget conceiving and bearing the Son of God! But the second reason I think this story lacks credibility is because it’s not the way I would have done it!

For example, why choose an unknown small, rural village like Nazareth, when Jerusalem – the political and religious capital of the country – is just a few miles away? And, why use some unknown, unmarried teenage girl to be the mother? Wouldn't a woman from a prominent, wealthy family have done a better job of raising the Son of God? And, finally, why send an angel to deliver such an important message? Shouldn't such things be handled in person?

So, I have some problems with this story. However, if history has shown us anything, it's that God does some of his best work in ordinary places, and through perfectly ordinary people. And maybe that's the point.

For example, there was once a man named Martin, who was born in Hungary in the year 330 CE. Although he would later become the Bishop of Tours, he spent his youth as an unremarkable soldier in the Roman army. One day, he was approached by a beggar who asked for assistance. In response, Martin drew his military sword, cut off the lower portion of his cloak, and gave it to the beggar. That night – perhaps it was a dream, or perhaps a vision – Jesus appeared to Martin, wrapped in the lower part of a cloak, and said to him: “Martin, today you covered me with this garment.”

I'll admit it's a fairly dramatic story, and it seems pretty far removed from us 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that Jesus does in fact come to us in such guises: like the people for whom we serve breakfast at St. Paul's, or dinner at Center of Grace, just to name two examples. So, maybe it's *not* so farfetched that God should come to us through an unknown teenager from Nazareth.

However, Mary's initial reaction is one of uncertainty, and she simply says, “How can this be?”

There's an old folk tale that describes how, after the angel gave Mary the announcement, but before her decision, there ensued a long silence. And in that silence, all the suns, planets, and stars ceased their movement.

Obviously, this is not an insignificant request, and in order for things to work out, there needs to be a lot of faith at work. Clearly, Mary must have enough faith in God to be used in this way. But also, God must have enough faith in Mary, that she'll stay the course. In any event, after a little Q&A between Mary and the angel, she comes to a decision and says simply:

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

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

I wonder, how many times do we need to hear today’s Gospel story, before we finally see the kernel of truth contained in it? How many of us have been waiting for so long for God to present himself to us in some tangible form? How many of us have recited so many prayers, and sung so many hymns, hoping for God to appear to us? Or speak to us? When, in fact, God has *already* appeared to us, and spoken to us. I mean, if God can be conveyed through an unwed teenager from Nazareth, can’t he also appear to us through an unwed teenager from Shawnee? If God appeared to Martin in the guise of a poor beggar, can’t he do the same for us today? Absolutely! And, what is more, as the parable in Matthew 25 tells us, God 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.

Through the archangel Gabriel, God says to Mary, “Will you help me?” However, through so many other people, God says to us, “Will you help me?” And, like Mary, we are troubled. Perhaps we don’t really understand what’s going on. And just as all heaven and earth awaited Mary’s response, God awaits a response from each of us.

And so, for the rest of this week, as we go about our workdays, taking care of Christmas plans and errands, as we go about our daily responsibilities, let us keep this Gospel story in our minds and hearts. Remember Gabriel’s announcement of God’s plan for hope and salvation. God is waiting for the Holy Child of Bethlehem to be born in *us*, and he cannot be born in us unless, like Mary, we are prepared to offer ourselves – our souls and bodies – to him. The Holy Child cannot be born in us unless we, like Mary, find faith and courage. And in the meantime, the heavens and the earth wait for our response.