

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸Then 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.

Grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In March of 2005 I stood in my ex-husband's office at Arkansas State University staring at the wall. On the wall he had a huge calendar that marked all of the Women's Soccer important dates and practice itineraries. As I stared at the calendar I had a huge realization wash over me – you see... I had just counted dates and realized that there was a very real chance that I was pregnant. As I stood there staring, he noticed me and asked if I was okay. I looked at him and said “Ummm... we need to make a stop at the store on the way home.”

He stared at me for a minute, then his eyes got wide and he said: “For real????” I replied: “For real.” He then responded: “Oh, poop!” (He didn't really say poop... I'm sanitizing this story for all of you. I'm sure you can all deduce what was actually said.) The next morning I took a pregnancy test and validated my suspicions. I was pregnant. Oh poop!

This was not the plan. We had only been married for 9 months... the plan was to wait a couple of years. Precautions had been taken. This should not be a thing... however, as Patrick's ongoing presence testifies – it was most certainly a thing. My emotions ran the gamut... I fluctuated between feeling excited and between a complete state of disbelief.

Again – this was not the plan. I was only 24-years-old... was I ready to be a mother? Would I be good at it? Well – ready or not... this was my reality. It was happening.

In our Gospel this morning Mary has a similar, yet more extreme, experience. She is visited by the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel greets her as “Favored one and tells her that God is with her.” Mary is originally startled... Old-Wives-Tales of the time stated that visits by angels to women often meant that one’s husband was going to die. As someone who was formally engaged, if something happened to Joseph at this time, Mary would be considered a widow. So, needless to say, an Angel Visit probably brought on a little anxiety.

We are told that Mary was perplexed by these words and pondered what this greeting might mean. I’m sure she is trying to figure out how “Greetings favored one... God is with you” translates to – Joseph be DEAD.

Gabriel goes on to tell her “Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God.” Well that’s good news... hopefully favor with God means her betrothed is okay.

Then Gabriel goes on to tell her that she will conceive a child and bear a son and will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, AND his kingdom will have no end.

Holy cow... because if a visit from a celestial being who typically brings messages of life changing doom wasn't scary enough... now this being is telling her she is going to become pregnant and her child will get a more impressive title than some of the most educated individuals we know today.

Mary is understandably somewhat baffled by this announcement... I mean, it's kind of a lot to take in... and asks – “How can this be since I am a virgin?” Clearly THIS is not Mary's life plan! Much like I experienced upon my conception of Patrick... Mary is experiencing some disbelief. I mean... come on. She is a young woman... probably 14ish years old... and a virgin. Unwed motherhood was definitely not on her agenda. Not to mention – it's a physical impossibility!!!!

Gabriel tells her that her child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit and will be holy... the son of God. He then goes on to tell her that her cousin, Elizabeth, has also conceived a child. Elizabeth was previously barren and is quite advanced in years so this news would have definitely been surprising and miraculous.

Gabriel tells Mary that NOTHING will be impossible with God. That physical impossibility can and will be overcome.

Mary accepts all of these explanations and shifts from a state of disbelief to a state of acceptance and joy. She says: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me

according to your word.” Following this as we heard in our psalm, she then sings a song of joy and praise.

Her life plan just got upended. I think that in today’s climate of sexual abuse scandals it is very important to note that Mary consents to this plan. She agrees to it. Many commentarians have pondered the possibility that she was not the first visit Gabriel made. There may have been others before her who said – Yeah... great honor and all God, but NO THANKS! Not my plan. Regardless of whether or not she was the first who was asked to be the mother of God is really not all that important. What is important is that she accepts this role.

In a very short span of time she shifts from a state of terror, to a state of confusion, to a state of acceptance. From disbelief to joy. Karoline Lewis states: “She makes a radical transformation in only three short verses, from peasant girl to prophet, from Mary to mother of God, from denial to discipleship. In a very real way, this is the appropriate transition from Advent to Christmas. Mary’s story moves us all from who we think we are to what God has called us to be, from observant believer to confessing apostle. Moreover, remarkably, impossibly. Mary’s story demands that we acknowledge the very transformation of God. It is no small journey to go from our comfortable perceptions of God to God in the manger, vulnerable, helpless, dependent. Yet, this is the promise of Christmas.”

Who we think we are – to who God has called us to be. Who do you think you are? Who is God calling you to be? I thought I knew who I was. I thought I had my life planned out and in a single moment... that plan changed. I went from being Ariel – newly married woman who was going to get the job and the house and the car all lined up before starting my family to – Ariel – dweller of a crummy one-bedroom-apartment, soon to be mother... too bad all the ducks aren't in a row. This is happening anyway.

Life has a funny way of throwing us curveballs... be it impending parenthood, or unexpected relationship changes, or employment transitions, relocations, or even random encounters with strangers that forever change us... we think we know who we are. We think we have life planned out... but we never really do. And in these curveballs we often are reminded of who God is and who God is calling us to be. Like Mary, we are given the opportunity to shift from a seat of observation to a place of engaged disciple.

Kristine Johnson states that: “We are made in God’s image and we are filled with God’s power to act in this world. To welcome that which is of God – love, blessing, dignity, and justice – and to reject whatever is not of God – hunger, fear, injustice, and oppression. Or perhaps even the thought that we are not good enough. God is at work today, all over this world, breaking in to people’s lives and liberating them from whatever it is that is holding them captive.”

Sometimes that which is holding us captive, what keeps us forever trapped in the season of Advent and prevents us from fully transitioning to Christmas, is our own plan and our own ideas of how things can, should, and will progress in our lives. We can focus so hard on our end destination that we miss opportunities and encounters along the way.

We know what happened when Mary let God work in her. Are we letting God do that work in us? Are we willing, like Mary, to be bearers of God in this world?

God's work in the world depends on our "yes." Mary bore Jesus, the Savior of the world. And now, we are Christ's body carrying on his mission. As we transition from Advent to Christmas let us also transition from who we think we are, to who God is truly calling us to be.

Like Mary, we too are engaged disciples, called to share God's message of peace, love, and reconciliation with a hurting and desperate world. We are called to get out of our own way, forget who we think we are, and live into who God is calling us to be. Even if this calling comes at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. Amen.