

A SERVANT'S FAITH

By Rev. Will Nelken

Has anyone else felt like December was evaporating like spilled ice on hot pavement?

It's a signal for me to intentionally be present, breathe deep, and reflect, not only on my surroundings, but also on the wonder of this season and its implications.

Over the last couple days, in particular, I have been thinking about Mary, the mother of Jesus. I find her story so compelling. Last week, we learned that her heritage could be traced directly to King David. Yet, there were hundreds of others who also could trace their line to Israel's anointed king, without such an outcome. It's never just about science or genetics. The mystery of divine providence bears the greater role. And then, there's personal faith and obedience. Listen again to the beginning of Mary's brief story.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

³⁶ What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For the word of God will never fail."

³⁸ Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Mary is introduced to us by Luke with just these few facts.

The history of her culture suggests that she was young—perhaps a teenager, only 13 to 15 years old.

Was she scared? Well, she was human, and a teenager at that, so I dare to say she was thoroughly scared. Angelic appearances were no more common among ordinary folk in that day than in ours. And this was no simple sighting... Gabriel was on a mission.

God called her a “favored woman” (literally, *endued with grace*), but in appearance she was just a girl, “confused and disturbed” by this encounter. As if the prospect of an ordinary marriage wasn’t enough... now this!

Perplexed, she wondered what such a greeting could mean. “Why me?” was a question at the top of her list.

I think most of us approach God’s promises and blessings with a desire to be fit for them, to be deserving of them (though we know that some cannot be earned), or at least aligned with what we perceive to be God’s plan. Still, when they come, we are often caught off guard, feeling less than deserving, and ill-prepared. *God’s grace still boggles our minds.*

Add to the emotions of Mary’s encounter—the shock, the wonder, the confusion, and uncertainty—the staggering details which Gabriel announced to her: becoming pregnant, bearing a son—a Son of the Most High God!—who would fulfill ancient promises and reign over her people, her nation, FOREVER!

“Dumbfounded” and “speechless” are words that readily come to my mind.

Mary’s confusion found a voice: *“But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”*

Our confusion is no mystery to God. Sometimes, He creates confusion to drive us to Him. The proper thing to do when you feel confused is to bring it to God. Just voice it. There’s no need to try to impress Him (since He knows us better than we know ourselves). Just express yourself, as you would with a trusted friend.

God began to unravel and resolve her confusion on the spot (though it took her lifetime to fully settle it). Let me assure you, you cannot imagine a problem or obstacle or eventuality that God has not already prepared for! God’s answer for Mary is also His answer for you and I: *“The Holy Spirit will come.”*

The Holy Spirit is God’s power activated in the here-and-now. He is God’s mighty arm in the earth today. There is nothing that God has ordained that is too hard for Him to achieve. He can

make a way where there seems to be none. *“For with God nothing is ever impossible and no word from God shall be without power or impossible of fulfillment.”* (Luke 1:37; AMP)

At this point we are apt to shift our attention to God’s point of view and lose sight of Mary (or whoever that troubled soul may be in front of you). After all, it’s good to think God’s thoughts, and they are right and strong. But troubled souls are also real, and their feelings are real, and they need someone who can just sit with them and listen to them, without always trying to “fix” them.

There was no quick and easy answer for Mary’s dilemma (and it WAS a dilemma!—if she was faithful she also would be misunderstood, misjudged, and marginalized, just for starters). She would ponder the meaning of her blessing for years.

Yet she didn’t allow fear to dictate her response. She felt it, but didn’t surrender to it. As a result, I’ve decided, I want to be more like Mary. I want to choose faith over fear. Hope over despair. Trust over control.

She said, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”*

Her willingness to say “yes” to God even though what was spoken over her was terrifying and seemingly impossible, still deeply moves me. What obedience! What surrender!

Do you want to say “yes” to the seemingly impossible? And what about those times when it seems *literally* impossible? When friends and family agree that it is just nuts? When you cannot imagine a single scenario where it actually works out? That’s when Mary helps me the most.

Just say it. Just say what God has said. Just acknowledge that He is bigger than you. Wiser. Stronger. Able.

You don’t have to work out your feelings first. Just say it anyway. Begin to do it, afraid.

You don’t need to be able to see how it could work. Just agree, and leave the heavy lifting to the Lord.

And you don’t need to help God with His plan. Just be His trusting servant. Let Him accomplish it in His time and His way. Just trust and obey. Leave the responsibility for fulfillment with Him.

The last several months have been a lot like a roller coaster ride (maybe for you, too). Relentless ups and downs, twists and turns, highs and lows, ebbs and flows, and I feel so aware now of how little control I actually have in my world, let alone the world at large.

Yet how reassuring and comforting is it to know that our lives are sourced and sustained by a Sovereign Father, who loves us and works it all together for our good?

Maybe you've experienced uncertainty, disappointment, heartbreak, or disillusionment this year, and you have found it difficult to let go, to trust, or just to get a deep breath. Let me speak life over you and your circumstances right now.

The God who created all things, seen and unseen, who sent His Beloved Son to rescue us and our broken world—He SEES you. He LOVES you. He is FOR you.

You've heard it all before, but this truth never changes because HE never changes.

Through Christ Jesus, give God your happy and your sad, your triumphs and your unmet expectations, your victories and your setbacks. And then, in the simple confidence of a servant, watch what He does with all of it.

This Christmas, my prayer for you is that you would encounter the goodness of God our Father like never before, and move forward into 2018 with bursting joy, fresh vision, and hopeful expectation of Christ's glorious grace, as you determine to set your hope *not in the outcome* of your situation, BUT IN THE FAITHFUL SAVIOR who stepped down from heaven to meet us in our struggle, to listen to our heart's cry, and to carry our weight to the finish line.

You are in His hands. And His hands are strong, and they are good. Serve Him faithfully.