

The Son of the Most High

Psalm 89:1-4

Luke 1:26-38

Mary told **somebody**. How else did the story of the Annunciation end up in the Gospel of Luke? An unmarried girl, possibly about fifteen years of age, living in her parents' home in the town of Nazareth, has a visitor. An angel comes to her. She is the only "ear witness" to what that angel has to say. We will get into what the angel said, but first I want to develop this point. Mary told somebody.

Did she tell her cousin Elizabeth? Luke places the Annunciation between two encounters with Elizabeth. Her husband Zechariah has had a visitor too, an unnamed angel who prophesies that the aging couple will have a son. Zechariah dares to question this unlikely story. The angel punishes his doubt by striking Zechariah mute. He cannot tell his story, at least not verbally, and will regain his ability to speak only upon the birth of the baby. This scene precedes the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke. Our verses open with, "In the sixth month", the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Immediately after our passage Luke tells us Mary walked to the "hill country" of Judea to visit her cousin. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb." Mary **must** have shared her news right then.

But did Luke get the story from Elizabeth? Roman Catholic teaching holds that Mary told Luke directly. Pope Pius VI speculated that Luke interviewed Mary within a

few years of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. While doing research for his Gospel and the Book of Acts, essentially the second volume of the same work, Luke spoke with any number of people about Jesus. Maybe Luke tracked down Mary and got the story out of her.

These speculations do not address the point of the Annunciation. But they do help us dig more deeply into the Bible. Hopefully they give us a sense of who the people in its pages were, what their lives were like, how the story came to us in its present form. However it happened, Mary told **somebody**. And Luke told the world.

As he tells it Mary is an engaged virgin. As we learned when we last addressed this passage, that word virgin then meant what it means today. The angel Gabriel comes to her and says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Such a respectful, even deferential address "perplexes" Mary. Try to imagine the scene. Young and female, she has always occupied the lesser place. She must defer to adults, especially men. And now an **angel**, full of glory and authority, gives her respect. **Of course** it perplexes her. It does more than that, for Gabriel next says the words Origen, the great 3rd century theologian, noted are the most common opening line spoken by angels throughout the Bible: "Fear not."

Young Mary is terrified. But Gabriel plows ahead. Mary has "found favor" with God. God has graced her. God has selected her. God honors her. She will conceive and...let's stop right there. She will conceive? Young Mary knows of only one way to

conceive and she has not done that. Nor does she intend to do so until her wedding night, when her new mother-in-law will have the right to inspect the blankets in which she and her husband will consummate their marriage. We can imagine she might focus on this part of the message to the exclusion of what comes next. But Gabriel does not pause. She will have a son. She will name him Jesus. He will be great, the Son of the Most High, and he will climb onto the throne of his ancestor David. And Mary, still back there at “conceive”, has hardly heard any of it.

The having a son part may well fill Mary with elation. To the present day, at least to a certain extent, one of the primary life purposes of every Jewish woman is to have a son. This angel has just told her she will extend her husband's family's name into the next generation. Hallelujah! She will name this son Jesus. Jesus is actually an anglicized version of the Hebrew name Joshua. It means, “God is salvation”. The implications are clear to us. Possibly they were not as clear to Mary. While she—and her fiancée Joseph, for that matter—do come from the “house and lineage of David” they are plain town folk. The Herodians occupy the throne of David. These pretenders are brutal, ruthless men propped up by their Roman masters to rule Israel. No Jewish mother wants her son to become a rival to such dangerous people.

But Gabriel has more to say. Jesus will reign forever. This is no human empire. This is the metaphysical fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah. This is the coming of God's kingdom into this world. This is the incarnation of God in time and space. But Mary's mind has not gotten there. She is still back on “conceive”. “How

can this be?" she asks, "since I am a virgin?" Gabriel tells her the Holy Spirit will make it happen. This will make the child himself holy. He will be called Son of God. This also echoes the prophecies of old. "Son of God" means "God". In the Hebrew mind and language, mere mortals cannot know or even name God. They can only refer to the ineffable, all-powerful being that is God in roundabout ways. Son of God is one of the simplest, most familiar of those ways. Mary must know exactly what Gabriel means. He means Jesus is God.

The episode closes with a surprising twist. Mary accepts what the angel tells her. A colloquial translation of her words here might read, "Here I sit, the Lord's maiden slave. I will do whatever the Lord tells me." From terrified teen to a model of humble obedience in less than three minutes. A beacon of faith not only to Roman Catholics who worship her only a little less than the boy she bore, but also to all who worship the Savior. Mary just receives the Annunciation. From this simple reaction we derive its first application to our lives. Things go best when we accept God's will. Though occasionally it is not easy or comfortable, things go best when we accept God's will.

Through prayer and support from your brothers and sisters in the church, accept God's will. Perhaps God has willed that you have children, perhaps not. Perhaps the children God grants you are "easy" (relatively) or perhaps they struggle with difficult issues. Regardless, through prayer and support we do well to accept whatever God has willed for us. Perhaps we never find a person to marry. Perhaps we strike it rich.

Perhaps we never come to love ourselves. Perhaps we gain the respect of others. Perhaps we contract a potentially deadly disease. Whatever happens, through prayer and support, accept God's will. This is no facile, shallow call to submit to an empty cosmos. I can testify personally to an episode in my own life when the only way to find relief from the fear and pain, and to hope that God still loved me, was to follow the path Mary took, to accept God's will. It worked for me.

The second application to take from the Annunciation is to believe its simple yet profound theological assertion: Jesus *is* God. Some listening to this sermon cannot quite believe this—let alone Luke's assertion that angels delivered messages from God, that Jesus grew up to heal people from physical and mental diseases, that he rose from the dead. To all of which we respond: “Fair enough. Miracles are by definition breaches of the natural order of things. God is hidden from us. Skepticism is logical and understandable. ***But we believe Jesus IS God.***”

Maybe if, like Mary, we saw an angel with our own eyes it would be fearsome, yet worth the scare. But unless God chooses to reveal God's self to you and me in some tangible way we face a different choice. That choice is whether to seek to believe Jesus is God. While we cannot create faith (faith is a gift we can only receive), we **can** choose whether to receive it. We can keep our eyes and our minds open to belief. We can let stories like the Annunciation inform our faith without worrying about their scientific accuracy. Maybe it happened precisely as Luke writes it. Maybe Luke got it straight from Mary. Maybe it happened slightly differently. Regardless, the point

remains the same. We are called to believe in Jesus as Salvation personified and to accept his will for our lives.

That theologian Origen was a brilliant man. In his *Contra Celsum*, a published debate with another Christian thinker, he wrote, "A philosophic mind has a right to think within a Christian framework and the Christian faith is neither a prejudice of the unreasoning masses nor a crutch for social outcasts or nonconformists." In paraphrase: "An ordered mind can think as a Christian and faith is neither a bias nor a crutch for foolish people ."

Or to cite a young Jewish woman, the 20th century philosopher Simone Weil, "(Science) is best conducted according to methods of mathematical precision, and at the same time maintained in close relationship with religious faith." In paraphrase, "Science works best when done precisely and informed by faith." Faith in Jesus, Weil meant. A survivor of the holocaust, Simone Weil converted to Christianity in the 1940s and advocated for its intellectual beauty and spiritual power in post-war France.

Minds both great and small, male and female, ancient and modern, agree. Accept God's will. Believe in Jesus as Savior. Life can be tragic. Origen was martyred for his faith. Weil's relatives were murdered by the Nazis for their faith. But both found comfort and meaning in Jesus. So can we. Learn the lessons of the Annunciation. Jesus is God. Accept his will.