

Angel Announcement to Mary the Maiden

Our human imagination can sometimes run wild when trying to picture foreigners, those whom we have never actually seen, and trying to imagine what they look like. We have tried to think of Martians coming and invading our planet and have described them as short in stature, green in color, and having antennae rather than hair. We have tried to imagine what ghosts that we have not seen might appear to be with sheets and holes cut out for their eyes. We have done the same with angels, assuming them to have wings and flowing white robes and almost invariably playing harps at the same time. Our imagination could, of course, run to more contemporary lines. We could imagine that angels get around on skateboards and wear blue jeans and play electric guitars which would be a much more contemporary view than that which is depicted often in ancient art.

It really doesn't make a whole lot of difference how we imagine angels to be, for it is not their physical appearance that most defines what they are. The word "angel" means messenger, so they are the mail carriers, the message carriers, of God. They are the ones who on some rare occasions have appeared to human beings. In virtually every description of those appearances, they are described as being like men, of having ordinary appearance much like us.

Angels may look like men, but they are very different. They are a totally different order of God's creation. They are more powerful, more intelligent, they have immortality — things which are simply no match to us human beings. They are as different from us as we are from ants. We are bigger, better and more intelligent than ants and in the same way, angels are bigger, better and more intelligent than we are.

The Bible, in fact, tells very little about angels. We are told that, by human methods of counting, they are innumerable, although God does keep track of them. He has a ranking system, and he has every one of them named.

One of those angels who occasionally has appeared to human beings has been named by God, Gabriel, which means in Hebrew, "God is powerful." He appears only twice in all the Bible, and if we may guess from the absence of other information, we may surmise that he spends most of eternity simply waiting for a task to be done. For thousands of years at a time, Gabriel stands at the side of the throne of God and simply waits. But when he is given an assignment, it is an extraordinarily important assignment.

The first of those assignments, by biblical record, was in the sixth century B.C. It was then that Gabriel appeared to a Hebrew man named Daniel. Daniel had been carried away into captivity by an invading nation, was first treated as a slave, but eventually became one of the highest ranking officials and some say second only to the Emperor himself in power. He had one of the Old Testament books named after him.

Gabriel appeared to Daniel in order to give him an overview of all of future history and to tell him precisely what was going to happen. When Daniel saw and heard Gabriel, he was absolutely dumb struck and fell flat on his face on the ground in fear. After Gabriel spoke and left, Daniel was sick and trembling for days. He was astounded, even for years afterwards, as he reflected back on that experience. While I am sure Gabriel put God's message in a sense in the lowest common denominator of human language, it still was extremely difficult for Daniel to understand. When we read those words in Daniel 8 we, too, find it hard to understand because our terminology and our way of thinking is so different from that of heaven.

When the message was told, Gabriel returned back to heaven and stood again by the throne of God and waited 500 years before God gave him another assignment. But when he was given his second assignment in the record of biblical history, it was by far the most important that he had ever been given, that any angel had ever been given, that anyone had ever been given. Gabriel was to go to a Jewish peasant girl and announce to her that God would enter human life and flesh within her body. It was something that I think Gabriel himself could not fully comprehend.

Gabriel had the equally formidable task of taking that which God had communicated to him as an angel and somehow translating it into words that a teenage Jewish girl would understand. I can only guess at what

Gabriel had the equally formidable task of taking that which God had communicated to him as an angel and somehow translating it into words that a teenage Jewish girl would understand.

angels feel and think. I know that they are preachers far superior to me and I confess to you that I probably attribute to them more human characteristics than they rightly

deserve. But I wonder, do angels get nervous? If they do, Gabriel must have had sweaty wings on that day that he had to come down and talk to Mary! After all, he had been given the most important assignment that anyone ever had been given. Do you think that angels prepare; do you think they practice what they are to say? If they do, I suspect that Gabriel wrote out word-

for-word the message that he would give, and practiced it over and over in his mind 10,000 times, because he had to get it exactly right. It was a message that had to be declared not only to Mary, but to all of humankind for all of history to follow. There could not be a stammer or a stutter. There could not be an imprecise or ill-chosen word. It had to be done in an absolutely correct way. But he had observed from his own experience and from other observations that humans can indeed be strange and unpredictable, and so he knew he could not fully anticipate how Mary would respond. He had to think all that through as well. What if she says this or what if she does that? He must not be careless; he must not pick any word inappropriately.

Then, ready or not, the time had come. This was one assignment for which God would tolerate no delay. He had planned for it for all of eternity past and it was to be done precisely when and where God said it was to be done. The angel Gabriel stepped out of the glories of heaven to a small city called Nazareth in the region of Galilee in Northern Palestine. He came and assumed a human disguise. We know that because Mary was gripped not by his appearance, but by his words. Not by the way he looked, but by the way he spoke and by what he said. Those words were prophetic. That is, they were words of that which was to come, a telling of the future before it happens. Gabriel was as much a prophet in the announcement that he gave as were Isaiah and Micah centuries before. The difference was that his prophecy would come true, not in hundreds of years, but rather in hundreds of days.

We have the record of that Christmas conversation that took place between the angel Gabriel and the virgin Mary in Luke 1:26-38. It is divided in three parts, a triple dialogue, the first of which is in Luke 1:26-29.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

"Greetings," he said. "You who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Have you ever been in a play and felt great relief when you got your first words out? He was a stranger to Mary; he had to begin somewhere; he had to say something. Before he got to the meat of the message, the conversation had to start.

In the Latin Bible, the word "greetings" is rendered "ave" from which we get the expression "Ave Maria." But Mary, of course, didn't speak or understand Latin or even the Greek in which the New Testa-

ment first was written. Her native tongue was Aramaic. I wonder if the English translation of "Greetings" isn't too formal of a way of saying it. I hope you will not think it flippant to maybe instead translate it that Gabriel said to this teenager, "Hi, you are highly favored. God is with you."

The words he spoke were exactly right. She was highly favored. God had chosen Mary, not only as the woman from all of her generation, but as the woman of his choice from all of human history. He especially chose her to be the mother of his son, chose her to give her genetic imprint to God in human form. Think of that! It was the genetic make-up of Mary that determined how tall he would be, the color of his eyes and hair and the expressions on his face. And not just as a baby in a manger in a cave in Bethlehem, but through

adolescence and into adulthood. It was the genetic appearance of Mary that Jesus the Son of God has even today,

God had chosen Mary, not only as the woman from all of her generation, but as the woman of his choice from all of human history.

for the incarnation was not undone when the last word of the Gospel was written. Jesus was fully God's son and still is, but it is also true that he was fully Mary's son and still is. Indeed, she was highly favored and God was with her. She was a very special young woman.

Now while Gabriel's words were right, he certainly didn't set Mary at ease. For this teenager was caught completely by surprise. This stranger with his unusual greeting astounded her with his words. Whether Gabriel liked it or not, she was scared — scared and troubled. She was upset because there were no categories in her thinking into which she could plug the words that had been spoken. There was no shelf in the library of her mind where they fit.

I find in her a striking humility. I believe that she was genuinely surprised. She never dreamed that this would be her calling in life. She never imagined that she was any better or any different from any other girl of her generation. In fact, if I correctly read between the lines, she imagined that there were others who were far more qualified than she. Perhaps it is that simplicity of humility that, at least in part, caused God to choose her. She said nothing. When Gabriel greeted her and said she was highly favored and God was with her, she was silent, just because she didn't know what to say. She didn't know what to think. It was as unthinkable to her as it would be to one of us if someone, a complete stranger, were to show up and give us a billion dollars or announce that we are the winner of a Nobel prize or crown us a king or a queen of some great country. Something that you've never even imagined ever happening.

She was dumbstruck. She said nothing. And Gabriel must have thought to himself that he wasn't off to a very good start. He had come to share with her, not to scare her, and he had scared her speechless. So sensing her fear and her silence, he spoke again. His second dialogue is in Luke 1:30-34. This time he said, "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Have you ever discovered that words alone don't chase away fear? When you are traumatized, scared speechless, when you think that this is the worst moment of your life or you fear that it is the prelude to far worse things to come, and someone says, "Don't be afraid — it's okay. Everything is going to work out fine." Don't you find that those words can be superficial and hollow? That sometimes it would almost be better if they were not said?

But Gabriel wasn't speaking his own words, for he was an angel, a messenger of God. These were God's words which Gabriel spoke, and God's words, unlike our words, can never be counted as hollow sounds and syllables, for each word of God always comes with the power of God. When Gabriel spoke the words to Mary, "Do not be afraid," they brought with them the calming power of God himself.

You may wonder, did Mary understand that? Did she feel that power and was she comforted and changed? Yes, in part she was then. But the words were to linger in her ears, repeated on her lips, and echoed in her mind for all the rest of her life. "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

With her heart at least somewhat calmed, Gabriel next gave the essential message that he had come to deliver.

"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

There. He said it. Gabriel had given the message that he had come to give and it was finished. He had said it and by his own appraisal it was succinct, to the point and it said everything that needed to be said. She would become pregnant. She was to name the baby Jesus. He would be great, the Messiah, the Son of the Most High, a king who would rule over Israel on David's throne, but more than that, a king who would rule over a kingdom that would last forever and ever. He had said it and he was glad that that was done!

Now it may have sounded succinct and simple to an angel, but not to a simple peasant girl in the little city of Nazareth. She answered Gabriel with a disarm-

ing question that I suspect he had never anticipated. She said, "How will this be since I'm a virgin?" Gabriel had just given her the biggest news in all of celestial history. He had told her something that no other human being knew. She and she alone had that information, the great love act of God, the most profound theological truth ever revealed, and she said, "How does that work? I'm a virgin. How am I going to have a baby?" Gabriel must have thought, "Has she missed the point? She's worried about the mechanics of this thing. Here God is doing his great act. Doesn't she realize what's been told her? Doesn't she understand what's going to happen? Can't she get excited about this?" But God had given Gabriel a special sensitivity so he understood. Rather than rebuke her for asking what might have seemed an inappropriate question, rather than telling her that she had missed the big point and gotten hung up on a minor detail, instead Gabriel gave her an answer.

The answer comes from the third dialogue that Luke records in verses 35 to 38. It wasn't an easy answer for him to give because I don't think he really knew what the answer to the question was. Because God had never told him or anyone. While it is true that

...when she (Mary) faced this crisis, it wasn't her intelligence or her education that came through, it was her character.

Gabriel had been sent to make this supernatural announcement, when it came to the actual incarnation, the actual conception, God would

never delegate that to any angel at all. It was something that God would do himself, and God had chosen to draw a supernatural veil that no one could see around Mary, and to accomplish something by his Holy Spirit in her body that nobody else would ever fully understand. For 2,000 years people have been trying to explain it and figure it out, but no one has been able to penetrate that veil. No one has been able to understand the extraordinary miracle to the point that they could answer Mary's question, "How?" God would do it and God would never explain it.

Gabriel did the best he could. He gave his answer like this, "Mary, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." I suspect that Gabriel's answer caused more questions in Mary's mind than she had even before. Surely she wondered, when is this going to happen? today, or are you talking about something that's ten years off? And where? Is it going to happen here in Nazareth or someplace else? What will it feel like when the Holy Spirit does this to me? Will I feel it? Will I know when its happening? Will I be scared?

Showing some special sensitivity to Mary's dilemma, Gabriel added something that to us may seem

somewhat disconnected. He added to his announcement, “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.” You see, that was something Mary could understand. She had this older relative named Elizabeth. Everybody knew that Elizabeth was barren and that was not a compliment for a woman in ancient Israel. She was far past the normal childbearing age. And yet Gabriel said that Elizabeth was pregnant, in fact six months pregnant, and that’s something you can go and check out for yourself.

As astounding as it was, it was something that Mary could verify. It was, in a sense, the gift of a lesser miracle to prime Mary’s pump of faith so that she could begin to understand a far greater miracle. Gabriel added this word to explain to her that she was dealing with God and with God nothing is impossible.

Mary’s mind must have been spinning and her heart must have been pounding. How could she in two minutes comprehend that which theologians in two millennia have not yet been able to adequately explain? Should she ask another question? Should she repeat it back to him to make sure that she got the words straight? Should she object, maybe suggesting that some other girl, some other woman, somebody in another town, another place, at another time might be far better suited to this? She had never really been asked if she had any opinion about it. You see, we must count this as a major crisis in Mary’s life, something for which no teenage girl is equipped. She was caught stunningly by surprise.

What Mary said next I think is more a measure of her godliness and character than anything else. I want to be careful that we don’t underestimate this woman. For while it is true that she was young and while it is true that she was poor and lived in a time and place where women had low priority and poor education in society, understand that she was the one whom God had chosen to mother his son. She was not ignorant or stupid and yet when she faced this crisis, it wasn’t her intelligence or her education that came through, it was her character. As is so often the case with all of us, when we face the traumas, the difficulties and the opportunities of life, more often it is our character than our intelligence that prescribes what will be our response.

And so it was a reflection of her character when she said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” No, she did not understand, but she accepted it because it was from God. She accepted it because she was God’s servant and that’s what servants do with their masters, they accept what they say. She accepted it because she knew God to be trustworthy.

I think that we could learn from Mary’s lessons. I think we could practice Mary’s character. For we, too,

face our surprises, our traumas, our difficulties, our opportunities in life. They may be different, but every single one of us has things in our lives that we don’t understand. There is a woman who is pregnant, but doesn’t want to have a baby. There is another woman who desperately wants to have a baby, but can’t become pregnant. There’s the family that’s being transferred that wants to stay put; there’s a family that wants to move, but can’t get the transfer. There’s health and cancer, joy and sorrow and life and death. We have long lists of all the circumstances that pile into our lives, that catch us by surprise, that leave us dumbstruck so we don’t know what words to speak until finally we blurt out to God, how can this be? How can this be happening? Sometimes God in his grace gives us at least a partial answer, sometimes not. But even after we have gotten that partial answer, we don’t fully understand. We can’t fit all the pieces together. It doesn’t mesh with our dreams. It doesn’t quite fit the plan.

It is in the midst of those circumstances of life that we have the opportunity in our character to follow Mary — to accept because he is God, to accept because we are his servants, to accept because he is trustworthy. Luke adds an editorial explanation. When the Christmas conversation is over, he says, “Then the angel left her.” As far as I know, Gabriel hasn’t been back since. So for 2,000 years this time, he has stood by the throne of God waiting for another assignment, waiting for God to again send him out to do something special.

As far as Mary is concerned and as far as the record tells, these are the only words that she ever got from him, but Gabriel and God counted them to be enough to get her through her pregnancy, enough to get her through the difficult birth under the less-than-best circumstances in Bethlehem. They were enough for his childhood, his adolescence and his grown up years. These words were enough for when he was crucified and she watched him die and enough for the rest of her life.

Enough for her and enough for us — the same words. “Don’t be afraid! Call him Jesus. He will be the son of the Most High God and his kingdom reign will last forever.” Amen.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
©Leith Anderson