



December 4, 2005

Luke 1:26-38  
**A Favor From God**  
Advent 2  
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“The angel Gabriel came to a virgin named Mary and said to her, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” That is how the story starts.

Mary was just an ordinary young Jewish woman, with ordinary dreams that included her modest wedding to the carpenter Joseph. She didn’t expect to be visited by an angel. At first she was *perplexed* by his announcement that she was favored. She *pondered* its meaning.

To be favored by God doesn’t mean that you are a favorite child of the Heavenly Father. It just means God is about to do a favor for you. (The word for “favor” in Greek is derived from *charis*, which means grace.) But when you are accustomed to being ordinary, the last thing you expect is to hear Gabriel telling you that God is about to be gracious by doing you a favor.

Like Mary, you would have to ponder this. You would be perplexed. Those are great terms that signal the beginning of a mysterious intrusion. Something is out of the ordinary. At work one day your boss calls to say he needs to see you in his office right away. A phone rings at 2:00 a.m. A woman wakes up one morning feeling a little nauseous. At first you ponder and get perplexed. That’s because the thin veneer of the ordinary has just been pierced by mystery. You can always tell when more of God’s grace is about to break into your life because things get unsettling and confusing. But that is just how the favor begins.

“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.” And Mary said, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” She is no longer perplexed. Now she’s terrified.

This is what it means to receive a favor from God? An ordinary woman whose only hope is to have an ordinary wedding with her ordinary fiancé hears that she is about to get pregnant. Does she immediately rejoice and say, “Yes!”? The other women will shun me and spread rumors about me; Joseph will certainly refuse to marry me; and, according to the law, I could get stoned for this. But if God wants to destroy my life, I’ll just call myself “Blessed.”

Most of the portraits we have of the annunciation to Mary depict her with a quiet serene smile. But that is not the picture we have of her in Luke. At least, not yet. At this point she has just realized that her life is out of control, and so she exclaims “How can this be?” Have you ever said that? Your well constructed life is suddenly shaken by something too great to control.

A change is forced upon you: I don’t know what the unwanted change is, but you do. Perhaps it involves your job, family, or your health. It’s the kind of thing that makes you lie awake at night as you stare at the ceiling asking, “How can this be?”

Your life has been interrupted. Things are not what you were hoping for, and they are not even what you had settled for. God has intervened, pushing aside the ordinary to conceive something mysterious. You can't manage it. You can't even understand it. All you can do is receive it. Because if God did conceive this thing, then it is a holy favor. And it will save your life, as frightening as that sounds.

Notice that the angel Gabriel simply announces the plans of God for Mary's life: "You *will* conceive in your womb and bear a son." He doesn't ask Mary's permission. This is one of the things we least appreciate about God because, well, when it comes to decision making we are big on process. But the angel doesn't say, "You know Mary, the Triune Fellowship was thinking this would be a good time for the savior of the world to be born, and we were hoping to use your womb, but we wanted to run the idea by you. Just want to keep you in the loop on this decision." No, it is the nature of God, as God, to take control of our lives, sending us to places we don't want to go, giving us gifts that we don't want, and taking away things to which we would cling. That is certainly what happened to everyone in the nativity narratives, and it is what happens in our lives because it is the only way salvation is ever conceived.

The angel responds to Mary's objections by telling her that the Holy Spirit has conceived this child. This is the same Spirit who, according to Genesis, once hovered over the face of the deep pushing aside the darkness and chaos to create order and beauty in its place. When she hears that, Mary makes the greatest declaration of faith: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This is the final step in receiving life's interruptions - choosing to embrace them. In fact, this is the path of spirituality that moves from *perplexity* to *terror* and then finally to *embrace*. But we can only make this journey if we are convinced that God is involved. I have spent enough time in hospital waiting rooms to know that the human spirit can withstand anything, as long we believe God is still in control of our lives.

Just to be clear, not every interruption in life is conceived by God. If your friends are undergoing tragic interruptions in life, do not tell them this is the will of God. You don't know that. But what we do know is that no interruption is greater than our God, and he can conceive hope in the midst of every tragic loss. This is good news only if you give up the illusion that life is what you make it, if you choose instead to see life as an unfolding mystery. Then, it is good to know that God is the author, and God never writes ordinary dramas.

At this point Mary has no idea where this interruption of her life will lead. She knows little about what this child will become — he will both break her heart and save her soul as well as the soul of the world. At this point she doesn't even see how giving birth, when she is not even married, could possibly be good news. All she knows is that God is in the midst of it all. And that is enough for her to say, "Let it be to me according to your will."

It is fascinating that after discovering that she would give birth to the Messiah, the first person Mary went to, with haste, was not Joseph or her parents but Elizabeth who had been blessed with a pregnancy in her old age — a very different type of interruption,

That's who Mary wanted to see. This means that the very first church service - the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ - was two pregnant women. And to this day, when we gather together around the Lord's table we do so always as a fellowship whose lives have been interrupted by something only God could conceive

When Elizabeth greeted Mary, we are told that the child within Elizabeth leapt up within her womb. And then Elizabeth asked, "Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Why me? We are a people who want to make sense of our lives, to find cause and effect explanations for why life turns out the way it does. But the explanations are not there.

To try to explain life is only another way of trying to control it, and one of the central messages of Christmas is that we are not in control. As with most of our why questions, Elizabeth receives no answer. Instead, her “why me” question simply evaporates as the joy within her leaps up to be so near the coming Christ Child.

Why you? Why has God chosen to present you with a Christmas gift that is creatively disruptive? It is not a bad question, but it is not exactly the right one either. The only pressing question is: will you embrace this favor?

*O Lord, let it be to us according to your word — even when that word frightens us. Even when it is not the word we were expecting. Do not abandon us to our ordinary dreams when a Savior is coming.*



