

## The Angel and the Trusting Maiden

<sup>26</sup> Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" <sup>29</sup> But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. <sup>30</sup> Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. <sup>33</sup> And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" <sup>35</sup> And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For with God nothing will be impossible." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26–38)

People are fascinated by angels. Books about encounters with angels, angels protecting individuals, angels intervening are best-sellers. But it may surprise you to learn that according to the Bible, angels are fascinated with us. Peter tells us that the things which have to do with salvation, with redemption, with the whole plan of redemption – these are "things which angels desire to look into". (1 Peter 1:12). Angels are interested in the gospel, in human salvation. Paul tells us that we need to conduct our corporate worship services with proper roles of authority and submission "because of the angels" (1 Cor 11:10), which implies angels watch our corporate worship services. They are intrigued by us, by our worship, by the whole experience of being redeemed and coming to know God.

The work of angels, according to the Bible, covers many tasks: worshipping, defending, waging war, protecting, executing justice. But some of their greatest tasks have been that of being messengers, heralds, those who personally announce and communicate God's truth to humans. The flood of angelic activity at the birth of Jesus all had to do with announcements: the coming of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus. Luke and Matthew record four appearances of angels – to Zacharias, to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds.

When God's Word is announced, your response to that Word tells us a lot about you. You can reject it, or receive it. You can doubt it or believe it. You can dismiss it, or obey it. The response of those who heard the announcements is a study in faith, what faith is really like.

We saw last week the doubting priest, Zacharias, who had spent so many years waiting, that he just couldn't believe Gabriel's message that the wait was over: his wife was to bear a son, the son would bring Messiah in, and restore Israel. His doubt led to some discipline, until he turned it around with repentant faith that what God said was simply true.

Our second angelic appearance brings us to a very different response, an amazing illustration of what faith is. We're calling this, the angel and the trusting maiden. This story has five moments: the situation, the annunciation, the question and explanation, the implication, the submission.

### I. The Situation

For Mary, life in Nazareth was the life of a very small village nestled in the rolling hills of Galilee. Galilee was lush, green, fertile farming country, and Nazareth was a small town in that area. So small it is not found in any ancient text, besides the Bible with one or two possible exceptions. Nazareth didn't make the news.

If you'd been up on a hill looking down on the town, you'd have seen a cluster of simple stone homes with flat roofs, whitewashed walls and small courtyards, their whitewashed walls. Olive groves and vineyards spread out around the village, sheep and goats grazed on the rather rocky, but still green slopes. Narrow paths wound between the homes, with all paths leading leading to the communal well, where women drew water and exchanged news.

Mary was probably around fourteen or fifteen at this time, living at home with her parents. Her father seems to have been named Heli; we don't know the name of her mother. We know that through her mother, Mary was related to Elizabeth, who was of the priestly line, so Mary likely had some priestly, Levitical blood in her. An average day for Mary would have meant an early start, pounding grain into flour, mixing the flour into bread, kneading the dough, mixing in the thyme and rosemary, tending the clay oven's fire, and then baking the bread.

By midmorning, she would have taken some of the large clay jars in her father's home and headed to the well, passing the craftsmen working in their open workshops—carpenters shaping wood, potters spinning clay, and weavers creating fabric on simple looms, children playing. At the well, the women would have exchanged greetings and shared bits of village news.

Once home, Mary would have likely gotten on to weaving, fingers moving deftly across the loom. rhythmically passing the shuttle through threads, weaving cloth for clothing, blankets, tapestries.

At this time, Mary was betrothed to a young man named Joseph. Betrothal was a more binding and more serious arrangement than our modern-day engagement. There was a ceremony, with witnesses, an amount of money was paid by the prospective husband, and then a blessing of some sort was said, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath sanctified us by His Commandments, and commanded us concerning illicit relations; and has prohibited us those who are merely betrothed; but has permitted to us those lawfully married to us by chuppah and betrothal. Blessed art Thou, Who sanctifiest Israel by Chuppah and betrothal.”

From that moment, on Mary and Joseph were considered to be as if they were married, though they were not allowed any contact with each other for several months until the day of the wedding.

It was during this time of betrothal, that Mary, alone in the house, received a visit by the same angel who had appeared to Zacharias.

## **II. The Annunciation**

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,...And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favoured *one*, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!” But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

Gabriel is given the privilege of announcing to Mary that she is God's chosen vessel to bare the Messiah. His greeting is simple: rejoice, which may have been the Hebrew shalom. Again, we don't have any description of Gabriel's appearance. In the book of Daniel, he is a described as appearing like a human.

Gabriel appears to be one of the very high order of angels. We think of angels as one huge class of similar spirit beings. But the Bible names various kinds of spiritual beings who may be as different from one another as a whale is from a zebra in the earthly animal kingdom. Here is a short list of the spiritual creatures that we collectively call angels: seraphim, cherubim, living creatures,

archangel(s), arche (rulers), exousia (authorities), kuriotes (lordships) dunamis (powers) kosmokrator (world power), pneumatikos (spiritual force), thronos (thrones). There appears to be an array of spiritual beings, and yet unlike us, they are not a race. They are not a family, descended from one man. Each one was created individually and separately. They cannot call one another “brother”, because they do not share one blood. The collective terms for them in the Bible is a host, or an army (2 Chron. 18:18) also called a camp (Gen. 32:1-2) or a company or band, Psalm 78:49. But it is not the sight of Gabriel that amazes Mary; it is his words.

He calls her a highly favoured one, one blessed among women, one that the Lord is with. Highly favoured means someone selected for a gift, a recipient of God's free, loving kindness. Gabriel says Mary is, among all women, blessed. It seems that Gabriel is gesturing towards motherhood here. Gabriel is not simply saying she is blessed among people, but singles out her womanhood, which seems to be singling out motherhood. Of all mothers, she will be uniquely blessed.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

Gabriel now explains. God has chosen her, favoured her. She is to be the mother of a son, whose name is given in advance. The Rabbis of the time had a saying that the Bible had six people whose names were given before they were born: Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and ‘the Name of the Messiah, Whom may the Holy One, blessed be His Name, bring quickly in our days’.

His name is not unusual. It is Jesus, which is the Greek form of Joshua. Joshua means, “The Lord is salvation”. Verse 32 makes it clear who this is – He will be great, the Son of the Highest, and the King who will sit on the throne of David. Mary would have known instantly that this is the promised Messiah. Verse 33 tells us His rule will be over Israel and His kingdom will not end.

And notice the strange truth about this child – he will have two fathers. Verse 32 says He will be the Son of the Highest – that’s a Jewish euphemism for the Son of God, but he will also be the son of David, a descendant of David. Son of God and yet Son of David.

Mary has just hear the astounding news that of the millions in Israel, of all the aristocratic women living in Jerusalem, of all the priestly families, of all those with royal ties, she, an anonymous teenager in Galilee, has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. But Mary is genuinely perplexed.

### **III. The Question and Explanation**

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” ”

Mary cannot understand how she could be a mother, when she is a virgin, not yet married. She was perplexed because while she was betrothed to Joseph, it was clearly not going to be Joseph's son that would be the Messiah. This was going to be the Son of God, and the Son of David. Gabriel had not mentioned Joseph once, which he would have, if Joseph were to be the progenitor of Messiah.

How could this happen? Was she to be divorced from Joseph? Was there something about Joseph she didn't know?

Notice the kind of question that Mary asks compared to the question that Zacharias asked. Zacharias

had asked, “How can I know that these things will be?” Zacharias had not believed Gabriel. Zacharias had wanted a sign to confirm.

Mary is not doubting Gabriel. Mary is asking how this will come to pass, because she can't see how she can be a mother.

So here comes the explanation.

And the angel answered and said to her, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.

Gabriel explained that this would be through a miracle, an act of divine creation in her womb, where a true human nature would be created in her by the Holy Spirit, simultaneously uniting in perfect union with the eternal Son, the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity.

This is not natural, it is supernatural, not providential, this is miraculous. This is divine intervention of the highest order, this is the single greatest invasion of divine grace into human history. God is creating a Second Adam in the womb of Mary, but this human nature will be joined to God the Son. Truly human, truly divine, two natures, one Person.

Gabriel told her that nothing is impossible for God. What cannot be done through natural means is achieved through miraculous means. Gabriel mentions that even her cousin Elizabeth had now conceived by God's special plan.

Mary will give birth to a boy while still a virgin, and as we will find out in the third angelic visit, she will be married to Joseph. They will be a family, but this child will be only the adopted child of Joseph.

But think for a moment of what would go with this privilege.

#### **IV. The Implication**

Mary decided to go in haste to her cousin Elizabeth, and there spent the first three months of her pregnancy. Perhaps to see the fulfilment of Gabriel's word, but perhaps also to get away from Nazareth and work out how she would share the news. But then she had to return to Nazareth. The moment Mary's family found out that she was pregnant, they would have been furious, and accused her of fornication. Her father would have been tempted to disown her. Indeed, there were even legal implications in the Law of Moses for a woman pregnant outside of marriage – she could be stoned. Imagine her picturing her parents reaction to convince her parents of the angel's visit, of his words.

But now we picture the women at the well, pointing and whispering about Mary. The stories, the tales, the gossips inventing all manner of wild and salacious tales, besmirching the character of one who had lived a pure and virtuous life. We picture them rolling their eyes at the “virgin birth” story, and speculating who the real father was.

And then we imagine the pain of her having to tell Joseph, or at least have someone tell Joseph, that she was pregnant. She knew he would not and could not understand. She no doubt expected him to initiate divorce proceedings for her perceived unfaithfulness. Perhaps it was God's will that she should be a single mother, raising Messiah on her own, perhaps under her father's roof?

This is what it would mean to be the virgin mother of Messiah: a ruined reputation that would never recover in her hometown. A life of being something of an outcast, no longer regarded as good and moral company for the other girls and women. A life of scorn, a life subject to gossip and speculation. And amidst all that misunderstanding, all that slander, she must raise the Messiah with a pure heart.

God selecting her meant her life was not her own anymore. Her life was now one of raising the boy Jesus, providing Him with the godliest home possible, with all the love and goodness a mother could muster up. She would have to fight against all bitterness, all resentment, all desire for revenge, all desire to vindicate herself in the eyes of her neighbours, so that she could raise this boy with a pure heart, with a heart unstained by hardened, cynical, bitterness.

She knew in an instant that to accept this assignment was the end of her simple, uncomplicated life. It was the end of her dreams for family life as she'd imagined it. It was the end of Mary's plans for Mary.

So perhaps we should pose the hypothetical question. Could Mary have refused? What if she had said, "I don't think I'm your person." Moses had said something like that. What if she'd said, "Please prove to me that it will work out." Gideon had said something like that. So what did she say?

## **V. The Submission**

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26–38)

She uses a very Hebraic way of responding, to speak of oneself in the third person as a sign of respect and humility. Look, the servant of the Lord. Not my will, but His be done, is what she is saying. I submit, I serve, I am ready to perform His will. And then she says, "Let it be to me according to your Word." I yield to God's purposes. Let Him do with me and through me as He pleases. I am willing, yielded and available.

In this moment, we see glimpses of why she was chosen. God's grace had worked in her and already shaped her to be a woman of grand faith. At her young age, she was ready to enter God's work, fight on God's battlefield, serve in God's army. She knew it would cost her everything. But see how quickly she has trusted and submitted. No delaying, no telling Gabriel, "Can I pray about it and get back to you?" No, "let me think about this and see" Like Zacharias, she knew that this is truly an angel, speaking the prophecies of the Old Testament. But whereas Zacharias wanted confirmation, Mary gives her submission.

She is ready to die. She must die to all her dreams of a normal life. She must die to being accepted in Nazareth, and having a happy, normal family with Joseph. She is the perfect mother to the one who will die for the world, who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Some people have taught that faith is simply seeing what God says and agreeing with it. They have tried to make faith so free of human works that they eventually make it free of anything except pure agreement. But faith is not simply agreement with facts. Mary saw the facts: Messiah was going to arrive soon, and be born as a man among men. She saw the fact that it would be a virgin birth. She saw that God had selected her for the task. But faith was more than knowing that was true. Faith, for Mary, involved embracing that fact, receiving them, yielding to them, counting the cost and accepting it.

When God approaches you with His gift, His free gift of eternal life, it is truly free, but yet there is a cost. It is not a cost you must pay to get the gift of eternal life, because then it wouldn't be a gift, it would be a trade. But it is a cost that you accept comes with accepting the gift. God offers you free salvation, free forgiveness of sin, but if you take it, it will change your life. It will change your reputation in the eyes of your friends and relatives. It will change your habits, your likes, your preferences. It will change the way you speak, and think, and act, and spend. It will probably change some of your social circles.

Mary didn't have to pay anything to accept the gift of becoming the mother of Messiah. But she had to submit to what it would mean to accept the assignment.

You don't have to pay God or bargain with God or trade with God. But you do need to know what He is offering you – a new life, a change, things that you will lose, and things you will gain, things that must die, and things that will rise and live in their place.

And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ (Luke 14:27–30)

He wasn't saying, pay Me up front. He was saying, understand what I am offering you – real life, new life, at the cost of your old life. Real love, sweet joy, at the cost of lesser pleasures. Come and live, but die to the old.

And just like Zacharias learnt, just like Mary demonstrated, we can trust, we can submit, because of who is saying these words. When the King of Love says to us, He who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?

Mary knew that God of love, gave it all up, and became the greatest woman in human history.