

I've been thinking a lot about Mary these past few weeks as we lead up to this day, or this night really, the night that we celebrate the birth of Jesus. I've been thinking about Mary for a couple of reasons; first of all because Mary is a puzzle in the mystery that surrounds the story of Jesus; as a woman and a mother I wonder about her and her journey of faith as she lived into her call to be the mother of God's son. Another reason I've been thinking about Mary is because of an article I read a couple of weeks ago that made me think about Mary in a new way, as not a mother or a saint but as a human person, with agency and spirit and grit.

I mean, think about it. Gabriel, which in the ancient languages means "mighty God"—Gabriel was one of God's heavenly multitude, essentially a part of God's self. God comes to Mary and says *Greetings, Favored One!* and Mary, being no one's fool, says *huh? What kind of greeting is this?* It just isn't every day that God speaks to humans, and Mary is...what? In awe? Suspicious? Afraid? Perplexed is the word that the NRSV uses—in other words puzzled, confused, mystified, flummoxed. And maybe more than a little nervous, at least, if not downright afraid.

In this way she is like many other characters in our Bible stories who have encountered God. From Abraham to Moses to Elijah to Isaiah to Jeremiah, over and over we sense that those who God appears to is puzzled or flummoxed and maybe a little afraid. And God always says *don't be afraid*.

So what we have here, in our story of Mary's encounter with Gabriel, is a very familiar story, but with a twist. It is a story of the *call* of Mary, the call to be not a prophet but something else; the call not to just speak God's words but to speak God's Word into existence, to become pregnant and bear a child that would change the world. The twist, then, is that Mary's call is also an *annunciation*, the announcement of an impending special birth.

This is important, I think, because it allows Mary to be who she really is: a human woman, called to a special vocation that was at the same time very ordinary, a human woman who would allow herself to be put in social jeopardy in order to follow God's call on her life.

Nazareth was not the center of society in Galilee; it was a small rural town made up of farmers and crafts people. As in most small towns the social mores are strict, stricter perhaps than in the larger towns and cities. The news that Mary was pregnant before marriage would have been surprising to those in the neighborhood—surprising and shocking. I can just hear the gossip: *did you hear about Mary?* and the shame that she might have felt. Shame not only for herself and her family but for Joseph as well.

Mary wasn't naïve, I don't think. She was probably young but she would have known what this pregnancy would mean. And still, she went forward. She trusted God that all would be well, that Joseph would still marry her, that things would move forward the way they were planned. And so she agreed. Not that she could really have said no, any more than Moses could say no to God or Jeremiah or any of the others that God has put God's hand upon. But she said yes with her eyes open and with full understanding of the implications of an unplanned pregnancy.

Then she goes to see Elizabeth, who is also pregnant in a miraculous way, and the words that Mary speaks show who she really is—that God has brought down the powerful and lifted the lowly; that God has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty. It is a manifesto, a declaration of the honor God has shown her, a statement of her understanding of what her child, God's son, will be and do.

On this Christmas Eve let us remember Mary and honor her by honoring the child, Jesus, who was the son of God; honoring by *following* him by doing justice and being kind and by working for a society and a culture that is just and kind; and by walking with Mary's God each and every day not just on Christmas eve but each and every day of our lives. As she did. Amen.