

For Private Distribution Only

Poor Mary. This is the one Sunday we Protestants spend anything remotely approaching quality time with her. Quite unlike our big sister, the Roman Catholic church, which hasn't hesitated to honor her image visually—in statues and paintings, in music—*Ave Maria*, in prayer—*Hail Mary*, and even in the names of its houses of worship-- *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*, *Our Lady of Grace*, *Queen of the Universe*... Of course this is no accident. We hold very different mariologies. (And yes, that is a real, technical word!) While Catholics focus on Mary's favored virgin status and interpret it as a literally perfect, lifelong identity, Protestants have been uncomfortable with that assessment at best. If we the theological descendents of the Puritans catch so much as a whiff of idolatry, we're running in the opposite direction. And so we did and largely continue to do. Rather than setting Mary above and apart, we've tended to focus on how much she might be *like* us—just your average small town girl: devout, yes, but nothing special. Not wealthy by any means. Engaged and headed toward a typical first century Palestinian life as a young wife and mother. Maybe a little nondescript, a little *blah*, if anything. Giving us permission to step into her one-size-fits-all shoes and see what it feels like to be touched by an angel and called to co-create with God.

So let's do that. Imagine you're just going about your business: Loading groceries into the car. Mowing the lawn. Sautéing some onions. Vacuuming. All the while daydreaming about your wedding day, the life you'll make with your new spouse, the kids you'll have, etc., etc. You're smiling to yourself, lost in your thoughts, when you feel a gentle tap on your shoulder and turn to see a radiant being standing before you. “What the...?” I suppose he *could* have just been part of

that daydream, but, when he speaks, it's not any script you could have written: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." You are absolutely perplexed, but not necessarily scared. "God has noticed you. You have found favor with God. In fact, you have been chosen to nurture and grow God's child within you and to bring that infant into the world so that he can be and do great things in his just, peaceful kingdom, which shall have no end."

...A totally shocking and inconceivable message. Not to mention, a total non sequitur... What would be running through your mind? Maybe something like, "Um, wow! You had me at, 'God has noticed you!'" Imagine yourself looking around to make sure there's not someone else in the room to whom this angel is *actually* speaking. Nope. And so, without the fear and the hesitation of all those Hebrew prophets who have gone before you, you declare, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

And the angel disappears. Poof! You're left alone with your own thoughts again and may well be wondering what the heck you have just agreed to. You're only twelve or thirteen. You're not quite married yet. What are you going to tell your fiancée? The Holy Spirit did it?! Will he ever believe you or trust you again? Beyond that, it's not going to look good when you start sporting maternity clothes and people do the math. If Joseph sticks with you, it will be okay. It will just say to the world that you have consummated your marriage and are officially wedded. If not and the baby is assumed to be someone else's, it's not unheard of for a 1st Century Palestinian father or brother to engage in mercy killing to relieve the family from shame. Even in cases of rape...

Here is where it really begins to hit us just how bold and courageous Mary actually was. And how subversive God was in choosing her to mother the holy child. Whether or not we believe she was without blemish, Mary's unwavering assent and commitment to this risky endeavor attest

both to the content of her character and the depth of her faith. God saw things in Mary she may not have even been aware she possessed and, up until now, probably hadn't had any opportunity to test. And perhaps this is where our Protestant perceptions converge with those of our Catholic kin. Spotless or not, Mary was a great woman. A great woman who probably deserves to stand as the first of Jesus' disciples. Perhaps even as the first martyr of the Christian faith. For Mary offered up not only her womb to God's purposes, but any dreams she had of living out a "normal" domestic existence, any dreams she had of raising a firstborn son who would grow up to be a carpenter just like his father, marry, settle into a peaceful family life of his own, and give her some grandchildren to fuss over. From the beginning, Mary knew that this would be no average child... and therefore that hers not be a quiet, run-of-the-mill life. She knew from the beginning that there would be extreme challenge and strife. And yet, once she got past her initial confusion, Mary answered the angel's call in the affirmative...

We may think this sort of thing doesn't happen any more. Belief in angels is by no means universal. And, even though we profess to believe that God is still speaking, it's sometimes easier to imagine that, these days, God's mostly just watching us from on high... One thing we might want to bear in mind is that the original Greek word for angel—*angelos*—it literally means "messenger." Must messengers be supernatural beings? Not necessarily. Two television shows of the past couple of decades which drove this point home were "Touched by an Angel" and "Joan of Arcadia," where human characters frequently spoke and acted on God's behalf. No, they weren't bathed in light or sporting haloes atop their heads. In "Joan of Arcadia" they frequently posed as a cute, slightly edgy high school boy or the slightly gruff lunch lady in the school cafeteria. About as average as you can get. How would we even know if we didn't have a TV show pointing them out to us? That's a very good question. And it leads me to wonder just

how many times in our lives we encounter angels and fail to recognize them or their divine messages.

I can tell you about *one time* in my life I have come to understand as an angelic encounter: About eight years ago, I'd become disenchanted with my life in book publishing and was trying to figure out what I was *really* supposed to be doing with my life. A career counselor had steered me toward law, and I'd applied to two local law schools. Just as I was coming to understand that this was a door that was not going to open itself to me, I met a UCC minister through my aunt Grace's memorial service, and we became close friends. It wasn't a relationship that was destined to last very long, but it did lead me back to an old friend to reflect. She knew full well I wasn't lawyer material, but this relationship helped her to see something else. I had just told her that nothing I did in my inventory management job mattered. So what if I prevented a book from going out of stock? I mean, really! Big deal! How was that making the world a better place? "What does matter to you?" she asked me gently. And without allowing me to respond, she summarized the qualities she had observed in me over the years. Finally, she said emphatically, "I think you would make the good minister."

I have to confess that in this situation I was a lot more like Moses than Mary: lots and lots of "but"s and "I can't"s. And yet her words never left me. They lodged in the back of my head and followed me. And when I finally assented to them, things all but fell into place. In that moment, I am certain this woman had no idea how profoundly her words had affected me. For quite awhile I thought she was completely crazy. Even in seminary sometimes! But, in the end, I believe that she and God recognized things in me that I did not. In fact, even some things that I had strenuously avoided doing in college and my book publishing career.

Now I'm no Mary, mother of God. And yet, aren't we all? Don't we all have the potential to be?

Here is how 13th Century German mystic Meister Eckhart put it:

We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.¹

Do we think that God is done interrupting people's lives to use us for the health of the world? Or might we imagine that God is still doing things just like this? Perhaps not conceive and bear the Son of God. That's already been done. But think how many other wonderful things there are that God wants to accomplish through us, so many that you and I couldn't begin to count them all. And frankly we have been placed in all kinds of places and positions to do those wonderful things. God has noticed and favors each and every one of us.

So I'd like to close with a brief exercise. I'd like us all to take a moment to contemplate the fact that God is at work in them and through us. And I'd like us to imagine one concrete place where we can make a difference -- where God may be at work in us. You may write this down now on the piece of paper I'm about to hand out or ponder it between now and Christmas...

I am favored by God. Indeed, God wants to do great things through me.

One of those things may be:

Because the God of Mary and Jesus is still active, I believe God is still at work in the world, even through me. Therefore, though I do not always understand how and why God is at work, I can still answer, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

And now I'd like to invite you to join me in the joy of faithful response:

¹Meister Eckhart, as quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon, "Mothers of God" in *Gospel Medicine*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995.

One: Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

Many: How can this be? We are ordinary, everyday people.

One: Yet you have found favor through God, and the Holy Spirit will come upon you, guide you, and work through you to care for this world and people God loves so much. For nothing is impossible with God.

Many: Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.²

Amen!

² David Lose: "Favored Ones," *Dear Working Preacher*, www.workingpreacher.org, December 11, 2011.