

A sensible first century Palestinian Jew would blush or possibly be outraged by this story we just heard in the gospel. A young girl, unmarried, living in her father's house, "protected" from outside forces, is visited in her room, in the inner part of the house by, we are told, Gabriel, who is an Archangel, a messenger from God, without the presence of her father or brothers, or any other males from her family. We've often thought of visits from angels in mythic, heartwarming ways, and the art forms we experienced as children and adults, in Catholic schools and elsewhere, helped develop our images of angels and particularly this story. PAIRED IMAGE

What we know about angel appearances is this: they are initially fearful events. Earlier in the year, when our bible study focused on the Angels of God, we learned that among the first words uttered by angels is: Do not be afraid. When angels appear, something really important is about to happen. And when angels appear, someone is going to get an important job to do, something which ends up being an essential piece of the puzzle we call salvation history.

This is also part of a longer **miraculous birth story**, one that begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth concerning their son, who we know will become John the Baptist. Miraculous birth stories are almost always told after the fact. In this case, we know that both Luke (who we hear from today) and Matthew, started with the Gospel of Mark as their main source, and Mark has no infancy or birth story of Jesus. So, for their particular audiences, in order to answer the question about Jesus and his origins, the "Who is this Jesus?" question, Luke and Matthew each add a prelude to their gospels, a known literary convention throughout the Hebrew Testament. Matthew is addressing Jewish converts to Christianity. Luke is addressing mainly Gentile, Greek converts. In Matthew's Gospel, the angel appears to Joseph in a dream, not to Mary. At least in this part of Matthew's gospel, he kept to the social conventions of the time.

The first words from the mouth of Gabriel are fearful as well, but we wouldn't necessarily be tuned into that with our 21st century sensibilities and our "we already" know this, isn't it heartwarming story mentality. The fact that someone "found favor" with God, while necessary and good for salvation history over all, often meant that for the person who God favored, life would never be the same. Hardship, persecution, pain, and sometimes even laying down one's life, were part of the deal. An angel, bringing an announcement of God's favor, this is "fearful" stuff, especially when you consider that God is revealing Godself to humanity through this Mary, this nobody, a child really. She's nobody's wife, and nobody's mother, a societal nobody living in the middle of nowhere, Nazareth. But as we know, God often chooses the most improbable to accomplish God's work on earth. TANNER IMAGE.

God chooses the weak of the world to confound the strong. With God, all things are possible.

Now, the message itself has the possibility of both embarrassment, shame, and scandal. Anything that would happen to Mary would be the responsibility of her father and other male relatives. In an earlier time in their history, Mary, and by extension

Joseph, her betrothed, might be stoned because of what was about to happen. And her family would be shamed.

And so, Mary is distressed by what the angel tells her (you're going to get pregnant) and she doesn't comprehend (how can this be . . . ?). You can understand how Mary might be afraid, weighing all these things. And with angel appearances, we're working in God's time, not human time. We have no concept of how long Mary pondered this before she offered her response, before she understood what it meant, or that she fully understood what it meant. The very idea that God would actually assume human flesh is really beyond our grasp. And there's no sense in arguing with God's messenger.

Mary eventually understands that God will assume the roles normally associated with a Jewish husband: the Holy Spirit will come upon her. Conceiving the Son of God does not happen in the same way as conceiving in a physical body. This type of conception requires openness, cooperation with the Spirit. The Power of the Most High will overshadow her – God himself will be her protector. God and God's work cannot be contained by social or religious or legal conventions or expectations. With God, all things are possible.

The promise made to King David in the first reading, the promise of a kingdom that will last forever, takes root in Mary. God doesn't choose the Temple as his dwelling, he chooses the womb of a simple girl from a backwater town. That Joseph was of the house of David was important in fulfilling God's promise to David. That Jesus is the foster son of Joseph, not really related to Joseph, doesn't matter. This is not a biology lesson. It's a theological truth presented to us. With God, all things are possible.

David's Kingdom was in a shambles, beginning with his grandsons. Jesus was born into this family, one in which some often misused power and authority for personal gain; one in which some used deception to gain what they wanted, and others who seemed totally unaware of God working in their lives. This family is just like our family. Yet, from this family, God chooses to raise up the heir to David who "shall stand firm forever." Despite the sinfulness of this family, it was still the one chosen by God to be the instrument of blessing for others. With God, all things are possible.

This gospel story, this infancy narrative, is not told to give us a clear picture of Mary. It is told, intentionally by Luke, to tell us about Jesus, and to tell us about our God. Mary could have played it safe, I suppose. But how do you say "No" to an Angel? Yet, it was Mary's "yes" that made all this possible. Mary listened to the word of God, (the very meaning of the word obedience), Mary pondered, and Mary said yes, conceiving in her heart before she conceived in her womb.

The other message in this gospel story is directed to us. God, through the Church, calls each one of us to be Christ-bearers. We too are asked by God to make a dwelling place within ourselves and within our world for the Christ. God works through real flesh-and-blood people, sometimes through the powerful and influential, and sometimes through the unknown and the unseen. We are each called to become pregnant with the

Spirit. Probably not in as dramatic a fashion as the story, probably not visited by an angel. But it's only when we say "Yes" that the Spirit of God comes upon us. God waits for our answer . . . sometimes minutes, sometimes hours, sometimes weeks or even years.

What it all comes down to is this: God is looking for listening hearts.
Is God asking you to say "Yes" to something? What will we answer?
Can this be our gift this Christmas?
Remember: With God, all things are possible!