

How Can This Be?

Luke 1:26-38

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When the Holy Spirit conceives something in our life, at first we think it is for our ruin. But eventually, we always discover it is for our salvation.

Luke tells us that 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. Mary was just an ordinary young Jewish woman with ordinary dreams like getting married to the carpenter Joseph. When you feel ordinary, you don't expect to one day be talking to the angel Gabriel, especially if he is telling you that God is about to do you a favor. At first she was perplexed by his announcement. She pondered its meaning. 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 at five o'clock to talk about something very important. You hang up the phone, pondering what that is all about. A phone rings in the middle of the night. You wake up and stare at the phone a moment before picking it up. A woman, recently married, wakes up one morning feeling a little nauseous. At first you ponder. You get perplexed. The thin veneer of the ordinary has just been pierced by mystery. You can always tell when God is about to let some of the glory of heaven break into your life because things get unsettling and ponderous. But that is just how God's mystery 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. That's the second step in receiving God's mysterious intervention in our lives.

Is this 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. In fact according to the law, I could get stoned for this. But if God wants to destroy my life, I'll just call myself blessed." No. Most of the portraits we have of 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. "How can this be?"

I know that some of you have great difficulty understanding the virgin birth. But I assure you that Mary had a much harder time with it than you do. It isn't supposed to be an intellectual dilemma, but an existential one. "How can this be?" Have you ever said that? I bet you have. I bet you said those exact words on the day that your well-constructed life was suddenly invaded by something too great to control. A change was forced upon you. A job was lost. A move had to be made, another move. A loved one died. You got a bad lab report from the doctor. That night you lay in bed staring at the ceiling asking, "How can this be?"

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

Notice that the angel Gabriel simply announces God's plans 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 that is most difficult for us to understand about God because, well, when it comes to decision-making, we are big on process. We like to be kept in the loop of these big plans. 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 decision by you and get your input." 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, taking away things to which we would cling. That is certainly what happened to everyone in the nativity narratives. 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. When she hears that, it is then 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 third step in receiving life's interruptions -- choosing to embrace it. We move from being perplexed, to being terrified, to choosing to embrace the interruption as a grace from God. But we can only make it to this third step 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 as 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. 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. But you have to make a choice to see the tender birth of salvation in these interruptions.

This choice to embrace an interruption has to be made, not only by those whose lives are interrupted, but by those who love them. It has to be made by both Joseph and Mary. Wouldn't you love to have sat in on Mary's conversation with Joseph about all this? Was Joseph scandalized? Did Mary try to explain about the Holy Spirit, and about being favored? Did she cry as she tried to make him understand? We don't know. All we know is that Mary's life was interrupted by God, and as a result, Joseph's life was never the same. In the sacred drama of God's mystery, some of us are Mary. Others are Joseph. Some of us are experiencing the creativity of the Holy Spirit. Others are finding their lives dramatically changed by that.

According to Matthew's gospel, Joseph has to do a little talking to the angel himself to realize that he can't put distance between himself and Mary's interrupted life. He has to take her in, embrace her interrupted life, and keep her as his wife. I find that when a baby is born shortly after a wedding everyone gets good at math. People will assume that since Joseph didn't "put Mary away," the baby must have been his. That means that Joseph was called to share in the scandal. But it didn't stop there. In ancient society single men didn't live in bachelor pads. Joseph probably lived with his parents, and maybe a few widowed aunts. So in bringing the pregnant Mary into his home, Joseph had some hard conversations of his own. He had to explain to his mother that no, he wasn't the father. But the Holy Spirit was. Don't you think that was an interesting talk? And the family had to explain to the extended family and friends. Thus, the interruption traveled from Mary, to Joseph, to the extended family, to the whole village of Nazareth.

Is this how God gets creative? Absolutely. Central to the Christmas message is the discovery that all our lives are interrupted by the birth of Jesus Christ among us. The advent of the Christ Child reveals that the whole world is more connected than we may want it to be.

As you come to accept God's interruption in the lives of those you love, it is a small step to see how related you are to the pathos of those you don't even know. The violence in the Middle East is not unrelated to you. Neither is the suffering of those dying of AIDS in Africa. Neither is the despair of the child growing up on the inner city streets of Washington. Neither is the homeless mother who spent last night in a car with her children. The advent of the Savior means we cannot distance ourselves from any of these scandals. Like Joseph, we will hear the angels of God telling us to take in these great scandals of the world, bring them home, pray for their needs, and give generously to their relief. Once a Savior is born in the world, you cannot cradle him to your breast without discovering that he is dragging the whole world into your heart as well.

So let us not get too sentimental about what is happening in the manger this Christmas. The reason Christ was born among us was to change the world. The reason his arrival has interrupted your life is to call you to his sacred purpose that in some small way you can participate in the salvation of the world. That's why we sing, "Joy to the World" at Christmas.

You have no choice about experiencing the many interruptions of life. They come simply out of the grace

of God. Your only choice is deciding if you will embrace them, allowing them to mold you into someone who looks a lot more like Jesus Christ.

Like Mary and Joseph, say "Yes" to the interruption. Don't resist it. Look for the creativity of the Holy Spirit within it. And say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

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.