

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Just imagine if you can, sitting alone in your room at the end of the day...perhaps contemplating the events of the day or thinking about what tomorrow will mean. Maybe you are mentally going over your “To Do” list for the next day or two or you are absorbed in worries about one problem or another in your life that seem to have no solution. It’s still in your room. It’s quiet. There’s barely any air stirring and you are lost in your own thoughts as the moon continues to rise in the sky.

Suddenly, there is a pillar of light before you with enough human features to capture your attention and your imagination and stir within you all kinds of fear and trepidation of the unknown. Nothing like this has ever happened to you before...nor to anyone that you know. You are frozen with fear.

Such is the scene for the young girl Mary whose story we just heard. It’s a story that we’ve heard many times before, but each reading and each hearing gives us an opportunity to contemplate something fresh about the experience of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Like her relative, Elizabeth, she’s not expecting to be expecting. But not for the same reasons. Elizabeth is beyond childbearing age and yet, the pillar of light who is the angel Gabriel, tells her that Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant and is expecting a boy whose name will be John. This is in the age long before fertility drugs to help barren women conceive and long before sonograms when the baby’s gender can be identified months before birth.

All of this takes place in a little mountain village in Galilee called Nazareth. The geography of this quaint little town is very much like the geography of San Francisco...unbelievably steep terrain with glorious vistas at every turn. It’s a quiet little town with a small population. Like all little towns everybody knows everybody else. And there are some very strict rules about the order of society not only here but in the entire country. There are certain rules and expectations about how people are to behave and prohibitions about what they must not do. Like most provincial little towns, rumors run wild and conversations are often centered on news about the happenings in the lives of other people in town. It’s pretty easy for a person to find themselves ostracized. Nazareth is no different.

Mary's family is a devout Jewish family and they enjoy the acceptance of their neighbors. Mary is a young girl who is betrothed to a young man, Joseph, who is also from a devout Jewish family that is of the House of David. The word 'betrothed' is often translated as 'engaged' in modern English, but it has a bit of a different meaning in this culture. The fathers of Mary and Joseph have come to an agreement about a marriage between their two children and Mary has agreed to be the wife of Joseph. They have signed a marriage contract in which each family has outlined the expectations for this couple. They are legally bound to each other. The only way to 'break' this engagement...this betrothal...is through a legal divorce. However, the marriage has not yet been consummated. It won't be until Joseph has prepared a house for Mary and for their children. When that is accomplished, he will go to Mary's home where she has been living with her family since the betrothal and he will take her back to his father's house where the marriage will be consummated and they will move into the home that Joseph has prepared for them. That's the order of things.

So when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, it is in her own bedroom in her parents' home where she is making her own preparations for becoming a wife in the near future. When Gabriel tells her that she is going to have a child, her immediate response makes perfect sense, "How can this be?" That part of the marriage hasn't yet occurred, so it's a biological impossibility.

How can this be? Mary lives in a remote village. She's not in the center of religious life in Jerusalem. Her family is not in the hierarchy of the Temple elite. She's not on the religious fast track. She's on the margin of things. She is not enmeshed in a network of influential people who can steer her into a position of power and privilege. She may, perhaps, be the last person anyone would think that God would choose to bring the Son of God into the world. Which tells us something about the nature of God and how he values people on the margins of society.

And yet, God knows Mary's heart. God chooses her to be the mother of Jesus, but Mary is none too sure of it all when she first listens to Gabriel. As Gabriel explains all of it to her, Mary contemplates what she is being asked to do. She doesn't say, "No." She listens. We can only imagine what thoughts must be going through her head...not the least of which is 'what will the neighbors say?' Turning up pregnant before the marriage contract has been completed is not just a matter of a minor public embarrassment. It's tantamount to adultery...which is punishable by stoning. She would be risking her life! And Joseph would have to bear the public embarrassment of his betrothed being with child either because he did something he shouldn't have done or someone else did. The extent of the possibility of public shame for both Mary and

Joseph and each of their families is probably something beyond our comprehension. Neither of them would be able to show their faces publicly with any safety.

And yet. Mary doesn't say, "No." As the angel Gabriel explains to her "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" these things occur to her not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. The power of the Most High that creates a human life within her also evaporates all her fears and reservations. She is filled with the Holy Spirit which overshadows every fear and rational objection that she may have. We hear it all in the Magnificat.

The end result is a radiant Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, physically and spiritually, as she realizes her chosen status with God and the great honor that has been bestowed on her by the Almighty. Her trust in God knows no bounds and consequently her human fears and reservations no longer have any sway over her. Once she said, "Yes" to God, all the human obstacles melted away and fell by the wayside. It didn't matter that she didn't know how "All would be well." She knew that she was being used by God for a great purpose and her trust in God was complete...knowing that God would take care of all things that she had, perhaps, originally thought might stand in her way.

How can this be? Through God all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.