

“There’s Something about Mary”

As I have mentioned before, the most common phrase in the Bible is “Do not be afraid.” Angels in particular are wont to use those words when encountering humans. Usually it is the first thing that an angel says to a human. It is the first thing that Gabriel says to Zechariah fifteen verses before he encounters Mary. “Do not be afraid” is also the first thing the angel says to the shepherds in the next chapter of Luke. But with Mary it is different.

The first thing that the angel Gabriel says to Mary is “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”<sup>1</sup> Her reaction is not one of fear. Rather she wonders about the nature of the greeting, not that an angel has said it. Gabriel, who was huffy with Zechariah when he told him about Elizabeth’s pregnancy, is now deferential. While Luke does not tell us, it could well be that Gabriel is bowing down to Mary just as he is pictured by Renaissance painters. Instead of being a fearful presence to Mary he is a perplexing presence of wonder. (Fra Angelico top, Robert Campin, bottom)



Gabriel is so used to frightening humans, that he tells Mary not to be afraid.<sup>2</sup> I think he misread her wonderment and silence for fear, but Gabriel seems to be the one who is unsteady here. He is not delivering a message to just any human. She is the one who has been selected to carry and give birth to the Son of God. She may only be a human but she is one with whom he knows better than to get huffy.



For centuries The Blessed Virgin Mary was the object of special devotion within Christianity. One aspect of the Protestant Reformation was suspicion about the devotion to Mary. Too much talk about Mary became a sign of papist leanings. Those colorful statues, rosaries, and prayers to Mary were signs of idolatry the reformers thought. Mary was pushed into the background in Protestantism.

For me as recently as twelve years ago I was deeply uncomfortable with Mary. The day I acknowledged that discomfort out loud I realized I was being challenged to look more deeply at that discomfort. I was also being called to look more deeply at Mary.

Mary is unique in how God approaches her. Gabriel is deferential and his words are ingratiating. God realizes that Mary can refuse. Indeed, I have wondered if other young women may have refused before God approaches Mary. It would make sense as being pregnant out of wedlock was not as acceptable. Indeed, it was not all that long ago in this country that pregnancy before marriage resulted in “shotgun weddings,” or the young woman was sent off to visit her “aunt” and returned nine months later

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:28 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:33

without a baby. If Mary agrees she would be taking a chance that God and her betrothed would stand by her. It was risky business as we know from Matthew that Joseph considered breaking their engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Think also of what Mary was being entrusted with. God was asking her to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, whatever that meant. She was also to give birth to a divine child. God was also asking Mary to mother this child. That is teaching him what it meant to be human. Of course, Joseph had a role in that as the boy matured. Yet, it was Mary's special task to nurse him, bath him, discipline him (how exactly does one discipline God's son), socialize him, and do any number of other things that would make him a part of Jewish society. She might have helped raise her younger siblings or cared for young children in the village, but what she was entrusted with was beyond her reckoning when Gabriel asked her to consent. Her response is one for the ages when she said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."<sup>4</sup>

God asks each of us to be devoted followers, to love one another, to care for one another, and to accept Jesus into our hearts. We have the Gospels and two thousand years of writing, saints, and testimony on which to base our faith, yet we struggle to do the little that God asks of us, but Mary did not.

This Advent season let us all ponder Mary as she pondered Gabriel's greeting. While Mary had few of the material and educational advantages that we have, when God came calling she did not shy away. She did not let other obligations or societal norms get in the way. She simply said, "Here I am."<sup>5</sup>

As we go through an unusual Christmas let us keep our hearts and ears keenly open for the invitation from God, Jesus or a heavenly messenger who is calling us to new life in Christ and a new commitment to God and God's people. It may not be convenient or even socially acceptable, but no matter our doubts and fears remember what Gabriel said to Mary, "nothing shall be impossible with God."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:19

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:38 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:37 KJV

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Celtic Morning Prayer 9:00 a.m.  
December 20, 2020

