

Mary's call story

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December 16, 2015

We tend to move past Mary's perplexed and pondering, wordless response to Gabriel's next words. But translators have made this story easier for us by using "perplexed" or "confused." The actual Greek word means, "to be wholly disturbed." No wonder the next thing Gabriel says to her is "Don't be afraid."

To such an announcement, Mary responds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Such a pious and unassuming response. We have a similar picture of Mary on Christmas Eve. Where the heavenly host is once again announcing the Good News of Great Joy—and Mary is simply pondering these things in her heart (Luke 2:1-19).

How easy it is for us to forget that this is a call story. Just as with Moses' burning bush, David's anointing by Samuel, or Paul's Damascus Road. Our understanding of scripture is often cast from the perspective of men. And to some extent, I think we've done this with Mary.

In first-century Israel, Mary has been around pregnant women, childbirth, and infants all her life. She probably doesn't feel the same fear that many new parents today have when they need to actually take their newborn home from the hospital and be completely responsible for the tender mystery of life. **The baby, Mary could handle.** But she isn't equipped to have the conversations and confrontations that this pregnancy would cause.

Gabriel goes on to give a few more details about God's plan, and Mary responds, "How can this be?" Gabriel then tells her about how the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and the child she bears will be holy. I don't think this *really* answers Mary's question. I think she's actually asking how it's going to be for *her*.

Despite Gabriel's kind greeting, Mary is "wholly disturbed." When Gabriel leaves her, I doubt she either falls back to sleep or goes on with her household work. I doubt she is overshadowed with peace. It might be interesting for us to know that this word "overshadowed" is the same word to describe God's presence at Jesus'

transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34). And if we remember, Peter, James, and John were scared out of their minds.

This is not just an announcement. It is Mary's call story.

Like Mary, we too feel “wholly disturbed” and fearful when confronted by God's plan, which is so different from the future we imagined. We wonder, “How can this be?” because it is more than we can understand. Like Mary, we too feel “wholly disturbed” and fearful when we don't feel equipped to follow the path God calls us to—to go where we have not been before. And like Mary, we may not feel comforted by Gabriel's words, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary says “yes” to God's call.

Mary says “yes” not because Gabriel had explained everything or promised to smooth out all the problems with her family. Mary says “yes” because our faith is found in the One who is powerful and who is with us. Gabriel reminds Mary of the same thing. The very first words Gabriel speaks—“Greetings, favored one!”—is literally “Rejoice, one who has received grace.” Gabriel announces Good News of Great Joy to Mary. **Gabriel's greeting is joy and grace!**

But God's grace doesn't end there. Actions speak stronger than words, and God gives Mary something tangible to edify her as she takes a step in faith that changes the entire course of her life.

We forget what happened after the angel left. Mary “set out with haste” to go see Elizabeth. With eagerness and zeal, she wants to see if it's true that a barren woman can conceive—to see if it's true that nothing is impossible with God. I think this is why Mary was in a hurry. Yes, she might want to congratulate Elizabeth, but even more, Elizabeth is proof that God's word was true.

Elizabeth's greeting confirms both Mary's pregnancy and her own. At six months pregnant, Elizabeth showed *very* physical confirmation that nothing is impossible with God. For three months, Mary stays with Elizabeth. Can we imagine the wisdom, encouragement, and prayer that took place between these two women during this time? The way scripture is told, it seems that Mary leaves before John is born, but I think this might just be Luke's way of transitioning us from Mary to John's birth. I think Mary stays for three months because she wants to see this miracle baby.

Originally posted at [Life in the Labyrinth](#)