

ADAM HAMILTON

The Journey

Walking the Road to Bethlehem

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The Journey
by Adam Hamilton
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I. Mary of Nazareth

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "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. The angel said to her, "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. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

(Luke 1:26-38)

Nazareth

THE CHRISTMAS STORY BEGINS in the town of Nazareth nine months before the birth of Jesus. Now, if any narrative ever cried out for attention to detail it is this one, so it's worth taking a good look at this little town and what it might tell us about the nature and character of God.

Nazareth is much more widely known today than it ever was in Jesus' day. It is not among the sixty-three villages of Galilee mentioned in the Hebrew Talmud or the forty-five mentioned by first-century Jewish historian Josephus, who knew the area well. This was an insignificant little town. Its population is estimated to have been between one hundred and four hundred people, though its lack of mention in the Talmud and by Josephus might suggest that it was far smaller. In telling a stranger about Nazareth, a native might well have mentioned the large nearby town of Sepphoris, which had a population of thirty thousand and was well known. Sepphoris was comparatively affluent, with culture, shopping, and undoubtedly all the other things expected of a prosperous town. Excavations have shown us luxury villas with extravagant tile mosaic floors. Nazareth, on the other hand, had few of these things. It was likely a town of farmers, shepherds, and laborers who walked an hour each way to sell their goods and services in Sepphoris. These were not affluent people by any means. In fact, evidence shows that, far from living in luxury villas, some of them may actually have built their homes within and around the area's soft limestone caves—the least expensive form of housing in the first century and a sign of relative poverty.

Nazareth's low social status is seen in John 1:45-46 when Philip, one of Jesus' first disciples, told his friend Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the

prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

As I picture a place like Nazareth today, I imagine one of the hundreds of little towns in Kansas—towns without a stoplight, with no high-speed Internet, no restaurant or nightlife, not even a grocery store. The children travel to the next town over for school. No one puts on airs in these towns. They’re just good, honest, hard-working people. This is what I imagine when I picture Mary’s hometown.

Living Water

Nazareth was likely founded at least a couple of hundred years before the time of Jesus by people who had come to the area looking for work and the chance to make a new start. Such people generally started towns where there was water, and there was a spring on the site that became Nazareth. Mary would have grown up fetching water from that spring, and in fact it still flows today. (In biblical times spring water—cool, clean, and bubbling up from the earth—was referred to as “living water.”) As the town was built up over the centuries, it rose above the spring so that, in order to see it today, visitors must descend below ground level inside the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation near downtown Nazareth. (In the DVD designed to accompany this book, I show you this site and most of the other places I’ll be mentioning.)

I can’t help but think that Jesus, who spent thirty years of his life in Nazareth, drew on the memory of that spring when he spoke to his disciples of living water and when he said to the woman at the well, “If you knew who you were talking to, you would ask of me and I would give you living water and you would never thirst again.” (See John 4:10.) Jesus knew, as did the

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people who founded his hometown at the site of that spring, that water is life, and he knew the blessing of living (spring) water.

As the name of the church on that site indicates, Orthodox Christians believe it was there, while drawing water, that Mary received word from the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Christ Child. (*Annunciation* means announcement.) As a result, many Christians believe that the mystery of the Incarnation—God taking on human flesh—begins there.

As I listened to and watched the spring water coming up from the ground below the Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, I was reminded of Jeremiah 2:13, where God said that “my people have committed two evils: / they have forsaken me, / the fountain of living water, / and dug out cisterns for themselves, / cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” Is it merely a coincidence that God, who called himself the “fountain of living water,” might have chosen the spring of Nazareth as the place where Mary would become pregnant with a child who would one day refer to himself as the giver of living water (John 4:10)?

Did Mary Live in a Cave?

Roman Catholics mark the site of the Annunciation not at the spring, but at what tradition says are the remains of Mary’s house, located several blocks away. From the late 300s, churches have been built on this location. The current building, the Basilica of the Annunciation, completed in 1969, is a modern structure built of concrete and has two levels. The upper level houses the nave of the church—its main sanctuary. Near the altar is a large opening that looks down to the lower level—the church’s holiest place. When visitors descend the stairs to the lower level, they come to a cave or grotto that is said to be the home of Mary and, according to Roman Catholic tradition, is the location where Mary offered herself to God; and “the Word became flesh.”

It strikes some visitors as odd that Mary's family would have lived in a cave, or that at least part of her home would have been in a cave. But caves occur naturally throughout the Holy Land. The soft limestone is easily hewn to expand the cave, adding additional rooms and even shafts for light. You can still find people in Nazareth using caves for their homes, for storage, or even as shelter for their animals.

In case you're still not convinced that people lived in caves, a quick study of the Old Testament reveals that Lot lived with his daughters in a cave (Genesis 19:30) and King David is said to have lived in the "cave of Adullam" (1 Samuel 22:1 and 2 Samuel 23:13).

As we will see, many of the important traditional holy sites in Israel and the Palestinian territories are grottoes or caves. It is possible that the cave was merely the "basement" of a home that was built above ground but later destroyed. (The cave said to be Mary's home has stairs leading up from the cave to an upper level.) But in some cases the cave may have been the entire home.

My ninety-five-year-old great aunt recently showed me a photo of a farmstead in Oklahoma where some of my family lived in the 1800s. Their living quarters, not unlike the caves in the Holy Land, was a room they had dug into the ground—an old cellar with a door and a chimney and an opening for daylight. A small building above ground served as the family's kitchen and dining room. In a part of the country that had few trees, underground living quarters made sense, particularly for people who could not afford to pay much for building materials—people who were just scraping by.

Living in caves in the Holy Land in ancient times, and still to the present, points to the humble station of those living in Nazareth and stands in stark contrast to the villas of nearby Sepphoris.

The Meaning of Nazareth

The name of this tiny village of Nazareth tells us something about the people living there and offers a clue to the identity of the child Mary would bear. Nazareth may come from the Hebrew *netzer*, which means “branch” or “shoot.” Sometimes when a tree is chopped down, a shoot will grow from the stump, allowing a new tree to spring up where the old one has died. That shoot is called, in Hebrew, a *netzer*. Why would the people who founded this village have called it “the branch”?

Much of the Old Testament was written predicting, or in response to, the destruction of Israel. The northern half of the country was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. The southern half of the country, known as Judah, was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in 587 or 586 B.C. The prophets, in speaking about the destruction and re-emergence of Israel, used the metaphor of Israel being like a tree that had been cut down, but which would sprout up once again. Israel would be led by a messianic figure called “the branch,” so Isaiah 11:1-4, 6 says:

A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse
[Jesse, you remember, was King David’s father],
and a branch [*netzer*] shall grow out of his roots.
The Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, . . .
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; . . .
[And in those days] the wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The *netzer* was a promise of hope. The word as used in Isaiah 11 pointed to the promise that, though Israel had been cut down like a felled tree, she would rise up once again. Fifty years after the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, the Jewish people would return to the city of Jerusalem. Judah would rise up like a shoot. And the people hoped for the coming of the “branch” that the prophets foretold would lead the people—a messiah. (Jeremiah and Zechariah also use this same imagery, though they use a different word for “branch” than *netzer*).

When the village founders named their village Nazareth they may have chosen this name as a way of expressing hope that God would once again restore Israel—that though Israel had been cut down by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and then the Romans, a branch would come up from the stump. They may have chosen this name because, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, it was a sign that there are no hopeless causes with God. They may have chosen this name as a way of articulating their hope that one day the Messiah would come to Israel. It was as if they were saying, “We believe there is always hope. We believe God will deliver us. We believe the day will come when God will send a new king who will deliver us.” Little did they know that the branch foretold in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah would be a child who would grow up in their own village!

Why Nazareth?

So, with all that we’ve learned about this town and these people, the question is: Why here? Why did God choose this town of all places to find a young woman to bear the Christ? Why would God choose this village, which was looked down upon by the people of Galilee (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”) and which was of such low standing that it was not included in the lists of towns of the Galilee? What does it tell us about God that this story did not take place in Sepphoris among the wealthy

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living in their luxury villas, but instead in Nazareth among working-class people, some of whom lived in caves? What does it tell you about who God can use to accomplish his purposes, or where God's favor lies?

The setting of this story tells us that God looks for the meek and the humble to use for his greatest purposes. God chooses the least likely to accomplish his most important work. God chose a slave people to be his chosen people. God called the youngest of Jesse's seven sheepherding sons, David, to become Israel's greatest king. As Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). James says it this way: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Mary

Let's look more closely at the woman God chose to be the mother of the Christ. She lived in this little, out-of-the-way town. She was likely uneducated and probably came from a poor family who may well have been servants in a household in Sepphoris. Perhaps they mopped the tile floors in a villa. It is obvious in any case that these were people without pretense. They were not people who believed the world revolved around them. They walked humbly with their God.

Mary was likely a girl of thirteen, although a more mature thirteen-year-old than we might expect. Young women married at that age in the ancient near East. We may find it strange today, but at a time when the average life expectancy was less than thirty-five years and most people did not go to school, girls were considered women when they had their first menstrual period, and they typically married shortly thereafter.

Mary was engaged to be married. According to custom, there would be a year-long legal engagement followed by a formal ceremony. Finally, she and her husband would consummate their marriage and begin having children. Every year it was expected that there would be another child. Women hoped and prayed that they might survive those births, one after the other over the course of their childbearing years.

Mature or not, Mary was no better prepared for the visit of an angel than any of us might be. Now, the word *angel* is a Greek word that means “messenger.” We imagine these as winged creatures, but more likely Gabriel appeared to Mary as an ordinary man. There is no indication in the Scripture that she was terrified by his appearance, only by his message.

The Orthodox, as we saw, believe Mary was at the spring when Gabriel appeared to her. (The alternative name for the church built over the spring is the Church of St. Gabriel.) This tradition is traced back to the second century. Roman Catholics believe Mary was at her home when God’s messenger appeared to her. Wherever he appeared, Gabriel’s greeting was an interesting one. He said, “Hail, you who are full of grace! God is with you!” (See Luke 1:28.) Roman Catholics are familiar with a slightly different version of these words: “Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!”

There has been a great deal of debate about the meaning of the phrase *full of grace*. Roman Catholic dogma states that this phrase, which is just one word in Greek, means that Mary was born in grace, without original sin. They speak of this as the immaculate conception of Mary—that she was conceived and born without sin. (Though Jesus was born without sin, many Protestants mistakenly believe that the dogma of the “immaculate conception” refers to Jesus’ conception.) Protestants tend to translate the word as “highly favored” and hold that God was

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showing Mary his favor, love, and grace. Protestants don't typically teach that Mary was conceived without sin and don't see in this phrase a warrant for teaching the immaculate conception of Mary. As a rule, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians have tended to exalt the role of Mary beyond what the biblical text may warrant based upon the traditions of the early church, while Protestants have tended to diminish Mary's role below what the text calls for. Regardless, it is clear that she was chosen by God as someone very, very special.

Whatever was meant by Gabriel's greeting, Mary was clearly confused, even frightened by it. Who was this strange man, and what did he mean that she was favored by God and that God was with her? Gabriel spoke soothingly,

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. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:30-33)

Gabriel told Mary to name her son *Yeshua*. (Jesus comes from the Greek; but Mary would have heard Gabriel's words in Aramaic—and in that language his name was *Yeshua*, which means "God helps," "God saves," or "God delivers.") *Yeshua* was a common name in Mary's day: think of the common name, Joshua, which is variant of *Yeshua*. The name typically would have conjured up an image of a great warrior who would deliver God's people from their enemies. Jesus was indeed destined to be a deliverer; however, he would deliver the human race not by the power of a sword, but by the power of his cross, his resurrection, and the message he taught.

Gabriel told Mary that her child would be "great." Her son would teach his disciples one day what that word meant when

he said that "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:26). Gabriel also told Mary that her son would be called "the Son of the Most High." All Jewish children were considered sons and daughters of God. What may make Gabriel's statement unique was the presence of the article "the." Jesus would not be another son of the Most High, but he would be *the* Son of the Most High. Finally, Gabriel told Mary that her son was destined to be the long-awaited messianic king who would rule over the house of Jacob forever.

In celebrating Jesus' birth, Christians celebrate the birth of a deliverer, God's son, and the King of a kingdom that is eternal. His is a kingdom not defined by geography, but by the faith and devotion of all who call him Savior and Lord. Jesus would later describe this kingdom not so much as a place, but as a way of living. The citizens of God's kingdom love God and love their neighbor. They even love their enemies and pray for those who have wronged them. They forgive and act as peacemakers. In this kingdom, people follow the example of the good Samaritan; they clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and welcome the strangers.

Christians believe that in knowing, loving, and serving Jesus as their king they find life, salvation, and hope.

The Virgin Birth

Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement was as practical as it was understandable. "How is this possible?" she asked. "I'm not married and I've never slept with a man." (The fact that she asked this question might tell us that she did not fully grasp what Gabriel had said about the identity of her son.)

Gabriel said to her, "God's Spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you. For this reason, your child will be holy and will be called the Son of God." (See Luke 1:35).

This passage lays for us the foundation of the doctrine of the virgin birth, which might more accurately be called the virginal

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conception. Both Matthew and Luke report that Mary became pregnant in a supernatural way. They are not attempting to describe the biology of the conception and birth of Jesus. From a biological perspective, Mary could only supply half the required DNA, or Jesus would have been an exact clone of his mother. Gabriel's explanation of the virginal conception is not biological, but theological: "God's Spirit will come upon you and God will overshadow you." This could be taken to be sexual language, but that does not seem to be either Gabriel or Luke's intent. Their intent is to be clear that the biological reality of Mary's pregnancy was made possible by the direct action of God. The church's doctrine of the virgin birth is meant to point to a union of humanity and divinity in Jesus. He was uniquely the Son of God, because God directly intervened to form him in the womb. The missing genetic material needed to form a child was from God. In a way unlike the Buddha, Mohammed, or any other religious figure revered by the masses, Jesus was the Son of God. He was both of Mary and of God.

In the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325, the church said that Jesus was "begotten" by the Father, and at the same time, by virtue of God's direct role in "begetting" Jesus, he was "very God of very God." God's essence, the "stuff" of God, was conjoined with human flesh. For this reason Jesus could say, "When you've seen me, you've seen the Father." Paul could write, "He is the image of the invisible God . . . in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:15, 19).

Christians speak of the Incarnation when they speak of Jesus. This word means, in essence, "enfleshment." The idea is that something of the essence of God took on human flesh in the child in Mary's womb. In Jesus, divinity entered humanity; the Creator of the universe walked among us through the Son; and when

he did, he came not as a conquering emperor living in the lap of luxury, but as a peasant, conceived out of wedlock, raised as the son of a carpenter in a village on “the other side of the tracks.”

This idea of the virgin birth became a sticking point for Christians, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Viewing the world through the apparent certainty of science, with a belief that God might only do what modern scientists can prove, they asked, “How can we possibly believe in the virgin birth?” Some rejected Christianity altogether because of the difficulty of making sense of the virgin birth. Others, called “modernists,” suggested that Mary and Joseph conceived Jesus in the usual way but that God had uniquely shaped their child and placed the Spirit within him and that the story of the virgin birth is less about describing how Jesus was conceived and more about making clear that he was uniquely God’s son. (There were others, more progressive still, who rejected altogether the idea that Jesus was the unique Son of God.)

Fundamentalists responded by saying that the only way to believe Jesus was God’s Son was if you affirmed the virginal conception of Jesus. They went on to say that if you didn’t believe in the virginal conception, you couldn’t call yourself a Christian. Some progressives countered that the virginal conception is not mentioned by the apostle Paul or in the Gospels of Mark and John. These progressives asked how, with such minimal emphasis on the idea in Scripture, this doctrine could possibly be a requirement for faith. After all, it seemed likely that many early Christians did not even know the story of how Jesus was conceived, so why should the doctrine of the virgin birth be seen as a requirement of the faith?

I understand the arguments of liberals, and I am sympathetic to their desire to remove roadblocks that keep many thoughtful people from accepting the Christian faith. I also agree that many of

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the earliest Christians may not have been aware of the teaching concerning Jesus' virginal conception. Having said that, in a day and time when physicians artificially inseminate and when scientists are capable of cloning animals as well as human embryonic stem cells, belief in the virgin birth does not, to me, seem so difficult anymore. Is it really so hard to believe that the God who created the laws of biology and who designed our DNA could bring about a virginal conception?

Regardless of exactly how the virginal conception occurred, what is important to me in Matthew and Luke's moving stories is that they attempt to describe how Jesus was more than a son of God, but how he was uniquely the Son of God. They point to the fact that in Jesus, God's very essence had entered into human flesh. (The Greeks had a word for this; they spoke of God's *ousia*—the stuff of divinity.)

How exactly God brought about the conception of Jesus did not seem to be a terribly important point in Scripture, or else Mark, John, Paul, and the other disciples would have made direct reference to it. But while the exact how of the conception of Jesus was not seen as critical to these apostles, what the virginal conception points to was thought to be very important; namely that "the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God."

Did Mary Want to Be Mary?

Thirteen-year-old Mary, standing by the spring of Nazareth and listening to the sound of water bubbling forth from the rock, heard the words of the messenger, and she tried desperately to take it all in. Would she really be the mother of the Messiah? She was to be pregnant, though out of wedlock. What would her family think? What would Joseph do? She asks Gabriel, "Tell me once more, how will this thing be?"

Yet, with her head spinning, filled with questions, uncertain what it all meant, Mary's response to Gabriel was simple and profound. She did not need to understand fully. She simply said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary said "yes" despite knowing that, according to the law, young women who were legally engaged but found to be pregnant by someone other than their betrothed were to be stoned to death. (See Deuteronomy 22:23-24.) She said "yes" despite knowing that some women died in childbirth. She said "yes" despite knowing that it would mean the end of the dreams she had for her wedding day, and it would likely lead to Joseph calling off the marriage. She said "yes" despite knowing that she might be an unwed mother with child.

Protestants have long reacted to what they perceive as an overemphasis on Mary within Roman Catholicism. We hear Roman Catholics refer to Mary as the "Queen of Heaven" and we chafe a bit. We've reacted by downplaying Mary and minimizing the role she played in God's plan.

However, it is important to stop and recognize that, aside from Jesus himself, no other human being played so crucial a role in the salvation of the human race as Mary. The redemption of humanity, and God's plans to step into our world, all hinged upon what Mary would say to Gabriel, the messenger.

Her assent set in motion the mystery of the Incarnation. As a consequence of her willingness, Mary's own body knit together the Messiah. It was her blood that carried nutrients to the child. It was her tender words, spoken and sung as mothers do to the children in their wombs, that quieted and comforted him. For nine months, divinity resided within her womb. No one before or since has had such intimate union with God. An ancient Christian hymn captures Mary's role in our salvation when it says, "He

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whom the entire universe could not contain was contained within your womb.” The early church called her *Theotokos*—the one who gives birth to God—as a way of capturing both the identity of her son and the importance of her role in this story.

When Mary finally gave birth to Jesus and suckled him, the Son of God was fed and sustained by the milk from her breasts. She tenderly held him. She changed his diapers and bathed him and sang him to sleep. She taught him and instilled in him faith in his heavenly Father. She feared for him, cried for him, and, more than anything, loved him. And, thirty-three years after his birth, she stood by and wept as her son died on a Roman cross.

These are deep, profound thoughts, and we have only begun to explore them. For while this part of the story is Mary’s, we find ourselves in the story too. Writing in a blog for *The Christian Century* a few years ago, Christian Coon told the story of a children’s Christmas pageant at the church where he was pastor. Dozens of children had come for the chance to sing and dance and dress up as wise men and shepherds, as sheep, donkeys, and camels. None of the boys were fighting over the chance to play Joseph, because he didn’t get any lines. But then the director asked, “Now, who wants to be Mary?”

Hands shot up and eyes danced as all the little girls jumped up and down. Every one of them wanted to be Mary. Hers was the starring role!

But then Coon asked this question: “Do you think Mary wanted to be Mary?” What do you think? Knowing the scandal and potential punishment for conception outside of wedlock, knowing that her hopes and dreams for a traditional wedding would come to an end, do you think Mary wanted to be Mary? Yet, with heart pounding, with uncertainty, fear, and confusion, Mary’s response was clear: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

As we consider that moment of decision for Mary, we see in her a witness and an example of how we are meant to live. Her

mission reminds us that God's call is sometimes difficult. It may lead us to set aside our own plans. It may mean giving up hopes and dreams we have cherished for a lifetime. It may mean risks. It may be frightening.

Sometimes God asks us to be with people we don't want to be with, to go to places we don't want to go to, and to do things we don't want to do. This is part of what Mary's story teaches us. Mary is twice said to be favored by God, and yet God's favor meant not a life of bliss, but a life of risk. It must have been hard to imagine that this was what it meant to be favored by God.

Knowing how Mary responded to God's request, we are inspired, with her, to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, we remember the little town of Nazareth and God's choice of a young woman from this humble village through whom he would do his greatest work. This season brings us an invitation as surely as Gabriel brought Mary an invitation. Part of the invitation of Advent, the season leading up to Christmas, is to offer ourselves wholly to God just as Mary did. Christmas is not about how much you buy or what you eat or whom you visit. It is about your willingness to say, with Mary, "Here I am, Lord. Use me according to your will."

Reflection

An Angel Named Gabriel

What do you think about angels? A Washington Times poll found that half of all Americans believe in them. The other half were not so sure. If we're talking about little babies with wings flitting about shooting arrows into the hearts of lovers, I'm not biting. If we're thinking John Travolta with giant wings as he portrayed the archangel Michael in a 1996 film, I'm still saying, "Nope." Clarence talking poor George Bailey off the bridge in *It's a Wonderful Life* starts to get a little closer to the angels of the Scriptures, but skip the part about him earning his wings.

When we read about angels in Scripture it is important to remember that the word angel simply means “messenger.” Angels typically appear simply as people—no wings, just people. Sometimes their attire is majestic or glorious, but usually they’re just strangers with a word from God. Sometimes they come in visions. But sometimes they come in the flesh. The writer of Hebrews notes that some Christians in his day, as they welcomed strangers, had welcomed angels without knowing it.

In our Scripture, Mary was perplexed by Gabriel’s words but not by his appearance, hence he appeared as a stranger who told Mary a word about God’s will for her life, and who invited her to be open and willing to answer God’s call.

To my knowledge I’ve never met the heavenly kind of angel. But there have been many people whose messages changed my life. When I was fourteen years old, a man named Harold Thorson knocked on my door. He spoke with an electrolarynx (a device that looks like a microphone pressed to the throat, to allow speech for those whose larynx has been removed). He was going door to door in my neighborhood, inviting people to church. Though I did not believe in God I was moved by this man’s visit and started attending church, and my life was forever changed. While in college I was selling women’s shoes in a department store. Belinda came in to try on shoes, but before she left she also

invited my wife and me to visit the Methodist church she attended. We'd been looking for a church. Her invitation, and our visit to her church, led to a call to be a part of renewing the United Methodist Church. How different my life would have been had Harold Thorson not gone visiting door to door, or Belinda not listened to the nudge in her heart to invite me to her church.

There have been a thousand more messengers since then. I think of the pastors whose preaching I heard week after week, and how God spoke to me through them. My professors at college and seminary, too. My wife has certainly been a messenger from God for me on countless occasions. And members of the church I serve, such as Nancy, whose persistent invitations led me to visit southern Africa years ago, a visit that would have a profound impact upon my ministry.

Which leads me to a question for you: Do you take the time, do you pay attention to what's happening around you, and do you listen so that you don't miss God's angels when they come speaking to you?

Today many of us are so busy, so preoccupied, or in such a hurry that there is no time to listen to how God may be trying to speak to us. Imagine if Gabriel had approached Mary while she was fetching water and she had said, "I'm sorry, I'm really busy right now. Do you think you could come back later?" Or if she had dismissed him as a crackpot when he tried to tell her about God's plans for her life. Yet this is precisely the

response many of us would have in our busy and preoccupied lives today.

God speaks through Scripture, through the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, but God also speaks through people (and occasionally heavenly messengers who look like them). Pay attention! Listen, lest you miss out on God's purposes for your life.

Lord, thank you for the people through whom you have spoken to me. Help me to pay attention and to listen for your voice through those you send. Speak, Lord; your servant is listening. Amen.

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