

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

In his book, *Peculiar Treasures*, Frederick Buechner imagines Gabriel's visit to Mary this way:

"She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath his great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."

Gabriel, of course, would have been fully aware of all the reasons Mary should be frightened by what he told her. She was young—probably around 14, but maybe even as young as 12 or 13. When we think of girls in their early teens, we think of ourselves, or our daughters, or maybe even a girl we saw at Wal-Mart or at the Mall. Fourteen these days doesn't seem as young as it once did—unless, of course, you're the parent of the fourteen year-old! Today, girls of that age are more worldly than their mothers were. Sometimes it's even hard to believe they're so young because they often look several years older. Children grow up far too fast and by the time they reach their teens, many of them have experienced things that sadden and sometimes appall those of us whose childhoods were lived in kinder, gentler times. As I remember myself at that age I cannot imagine what it's like to be a teenager today. But, then, I also find it hard to imagine Mary's circumstances in her own day and culture. Being a girl and an unmarried daughter was not easy.

In Ecclesiasticus, that wise and wonderful book from the Apocrypha, Sirach gives us a glimpse of what life would have been like for a daughter in Mary's time. He writes:

"A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father,
and worry over her robs him of sleep;
"when she is young, for fear she may not marry,
or if married, for fear she may be disliked;
"while a virgin, for fear she may be seduced
and become pregnant in her father's house;
"or having a husband, for fear she may go astray,
or though married, for fear she may be barren.
"Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter,
or she may make you a laughingstock to your enemies,
"a byword in the city and the assembly of the people,
and put you to shame in public gatherings.
"See that there is no lattice in her room,
no spot that overlooks the approaches to the house.

Modern fathers of teenage girls will probably find a lot to connect with in that passage. But remember, it was written more than two thousand years ago. It's not tongue-in-cheek; it speaks truthfully to the station of women in that time. Mary's father was likely relieved by Mary's betrothal to Joseph, and was probably counting the days until the actual marriage ceremony took place, which could be quite some time in the future. Although the translation we heard today uses the word "engaged" to describe Mary and Joseph's relationship, betrothed would be more accurate. Betrothal was much different from our modern practice of engagement. The marriage contract which signified betrothal brought together two families, not two people who were romantically attracted to one another. The contract assumed the bride was a virgin, because virginity was essential for an honorable marriage. If that changed during the betrothal, there would be grounds for a divorce. A formal divorce was the *only* thing that could break the agreement between the families. A divorce caused by something as scandalous as the pregnancy of a betrothed woman would bring great shame to her family. And shame was to be avoided at all costs.

But Mary said yes! Knowing that her pregnancy would change everything, knowing that Joseph would have every right to divorce her, knowing that she would be shaming her family, she still said yes. Her answer is nothing short of remarkable, considering not only her circumstances but also the example of some of her forefather. Jeremiah said, "I'm too young." Isaiah said, "I'm a man of unclean lips." Moses said, "I stutter," and then tried several other things to get out of what God was asking him to do. Gideon said, "I'm the least of all people; surely you don't mean me."

Men—all of them—in a man's world. But Mary, a young girl who truly *was* near the bottom of the social and cultural ladder of her day, said yes. She said yes despite everything she knew it would mean. She had only one question, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Surely there were other questions she might have asked of Gabriel: what will my parents think? What will they do? What will Joseph think of me? Why me? But Mary didn't ask questions. She didn't make excuses about why she couldn't possibly say yes to the outrageous announcement delivered by God's own angel Gabriel. She believed Gabriel when he said, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Then she surrendered herself, her will, her future—to hear God's word, to obey God's will, to entrust her future to God—even though it put her in an awkward, difficult, and complicated situation. And then she said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Throughout the ages, Mary has been portrayed in countless paintings, in Christmas pageants, and in Christmas cards, in crèches, in so many different depictions we can't name them all; but she always appears serene, lovely, seemingly unruffled by all that happened to her. Perhaps that's why it's so easy for us to forget that at the beginning of our story, she was simply a girl, living an ordinary life that was one day suddenly turned upside down. Like us, she was only a human being. Only a girl. We can't overlook Mary's humanity because that is what gave Jesus his own humanity. It was through Mary that God became incarnate, fully divine yet fully human, living among us, the Word made flesh.

The mystery and meaning of Gabriel's visit to Mary doesn't stop at the end of today's lesson. We will forever wonder why God chose this young girl to bear the Messiah. We may never understand how God could love us so much that God chose to become human and live among us. It is a mystery that cannot be solved, a mystery that finds its meaning only in faith.

Like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Gideon, Moses, and countless others, *we* can find a myriad of reasons not to be still, not to listen to God, not to quietly accept God's invitation to be with us as God was with Mary. Sometimes what God is calling us to do seems impossible. Mary's unselfish, faithful response to what seemed impossible in her own life is an example for us. That God chose a young girl is amazing to us, but it reminds us that God accepts us unconditionally in our own humanity. When we give up our fears, when we allow the Holy Spirit to come upon us and the Power of the Most High to overshadow us, God can do the impossible through us just as God did what seemed to be impossible through Mary.

After the angel Gabriel left Mary, she went with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth who immediately recognized Mary to be the mother of her Lord. Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said,

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:

the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,

he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

The promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.

And let the people say, Amen.