

“The Meaning of Christmas: Through the Eyes of Jesus’ Mother, Mary”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: December 10, 2023



In our first reading¹, we listened in as the Prophet Isaiah spoke aloud the desperate prayer of the people of God . . . “O [Lord] that You would tear open the heavens and come down . . . so the mountains would quake at Your presence!”

In our second reading², we listened in as the angel Gabriel announced that the heavens ARE going to be torn open and the God of All Creation IS going to come down . . . BUT not in a way that make the mountains quake and not in a way that the people of God may have expected.

God elects to come down — in love — as a human child, as a child of Mary.

Mary is probably the most well-known woman in history, and yet there is much that we do not know about her.

The Biblical author does not tell us how old Mary is when the angel Gabriel visits her.

We don’t know if she came from a big family or was an only child.

We don’t know if she was tall or short.

There are lots of details that are missing.

And yet we actually learn a lot about Mary from this morning’s passage.

The Biblical author seems to be implying that the physical details about Mary simply aren’t as important as the spiritual ones.

It is how she reacts to God’s invitation that really matters.

We heard in the Scripture that Mary is told by Gabriel that she is the object of God’s grace and that God is with her.

And her response is to be troubled and to ponder what the angel is saying.

Based on Gabriel’s words — “do not be afraid” — Mary may also have been a little frightened by her visitor and his greeting.

I think it is important that we get to hear that Mary is perplexed and even frightened at God’s message to her. It helps keep her real and relatable — rather than perfect and on a pedestal.

And we can certainly relate. Who wouldn’t be startled by a visit from an angel and want to try to figure out what it all means?

And yet Mary seems to have an understanding and a trust in God that overcomes her fear and allows her to listen and ponder and not go shrieking from the scene.

We sense that God has been preparing her for this moment — even if it is a surprise to her.

Gabriel goes on to reveal the call that God is bringing to Mary.

¹ Isaiah 64:1-5

² Luke 1:26-38

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Gabriel announces the Good News that God is coming to earth as a human child. This Child will be great. And He will be named Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High and He will become the ruler over God’s people and His kingdom will have no end. God is tearing open the heavens and coming down — in person.

Understandably, Mary asks how all this will happen, and she is told that the Holy Spirit will make it happen. And remarkably, she says “yes.”

Mary agrees to being a God-bearer. Mary agrees to letting the Holy Spirit have its way with her. In words that are so beautiful and so powerful, Mary says “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

We don’t know how much time Mary took to say “yes.” We don’t know if her fear rose back up, if she wondered what her family and other people would say, if she thought about how hard it would be, if she started thinking about how she would control things and manage things, or if she thought about how she would share this news with Joseph. The Biblical author doesn’t tell us these things. We only know that Gabriel stayed with her until she was ready to answer. And when she did so, she answered in trust that nothing was impossible with God. She opened herself to being a partner to God’s purposes. She said “yes” to the gift that was being offered and any hardship that would come with it.

We are told that it is only after Mary’s “yes” that the angel departs. The angel understood that Mary’s “yes” was essential. Mary’s “yes” is critical to the coming of God to earth as Emmanuel, God with us.

God, of course, could have done it all without Mary. As the angel said, “nothing is impossible with God.” And yet, God elected to have a human partner when the heavens were torn open. And Mary was called to be that partner.

There is no question that this encounter between Mary and Gabriel is unique and unfamiliar . . . both in its scope for humankind and for its supernatural aspects. And yet in other ways, this encounter is familiar and universal.

You see, God continues to invite human partnership in God’s plans.

In many ways, Mary’s encounter with God’s messenger is a blueprint for our own relationship with God and the calls on our lives.

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Now, I don't think very many of us will be personally visited by the angel Gabriel. But through the person of Jesus, we have been shown that God is with us and that God's grace has been extended to us.

Like God's call to Mary, God invites US to say "yes" to God's plans.
Like God's call to Mary, God invites us to be God-bearers, saying "yes" to the Holy Spirit's presence within us.
And like God's call to Mary, God invites us to let the Holy Spirit have its way with us.
And like Mary, our "yes" really matters.

God has purposed each of us for partnership with God.
Has God been inviting something in your life?
Are there things that need to be pondered or is fear delaying your "yes"?

Or perhaps you are in the middle of a call and it has grown hard?
Gabriel's statement that nothing is impossible for God is both for those who are hearing a call and for those who are in the middle of one.

When we take a call, we find that we keep saying "yes."
Mary said "yes" over and over again throughout Jesus' life.
And we are called to do the same.

So the question is are we listening for God? And can we work through our fears and say "yes"?