

Luke 1:26-38  
December 18, 2011

South Plains

### More Than We Dreamed

Tina started coming to our youth group when she was about 13 years old. Although she never joined the church, she was a dependable teen for youth activities, including our annual trip to Montreat. One day on that long drive to the mountains, the subject of dating came up and I asked if she had a boyfriend. "Oh no," she replied. "Nobody's interested in me." Her answer surprised me because she was cute and seemed quite at ease with the other kids and adults. That exchange was one of those epiphanies when I realized that no matter how others see us, how we feel about our place in the world makes all the difference. Tina did not dream that anyone could be interested in her.

Many of us underestimate ourselves. I believe all of us underestimate God's ability to use us. We may have doubts about our faith, our acceptability to God, or the usefulness of our talents. We cannot dream that we might make a difference in God's world. Maybe that's why Mary was so perplexed when Gabriel showed up on her doorstep with his strangely disturbing words: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

I suppose seeing an angel is unsettling enough although it would be reassuring to hear that the Lord is with you. But, Mary was thrown off balance by the divine

compliment that calls her "favored one." This adjective "favored" implies grace since it is rooted in the Greek word "grace." It is not that God sees Mary as especially beautiful or virtuous or pious. She is no Christmas pageant Mary. She is "favored" because the Lord has chosen her for a special task that is going to be revealed in the rest of Gabriel's message.

Before Gabriel explains further, he has to calm Mary. Luke says, "She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Can't you imagine what must have been going through her mind? Was she dreaming? Had she mistakenly done something to attract the attention of heaven? Even if this angelic visitation turns out to be a good thing, what might it mean? She wonders and worries.

So the angel reassures her by repeating that special word 'favor.' "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." It will be a strange and trying favor. She's well to be debating in her mind what sort of greeting this is. It will turn her life upside down: an unplanned pregnancy, escape to Egypt, a precocious child who comes to an untimely end. None of this is in view as Gabriel is speaking. But Mary is no fool. All those fancy predictions about a baby yet to be impossibly conceived were promises bound to come with a price. What would be required of her?

Some dear friends of ours had a grandson who entered the University of Virginia, I believe, when he was

just fourteen years old. Despite his academic prowess, rearing a gifted child comes with a price. I wonder if Mary had some inkling of the emotional strain waiting for her as the mother of a boy who would run away to dialogue with the priests, a young man accused one day of consorting with wine-bibbers and sinners, a promising preacher convicted of treason against the Roman Empire. Whatever motherly dreams Mary had of dangling a child on her knee would require a make-over.

But, all that was in the future. A more immediate problem took precedence. “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’” Generations of Christians have asked the same question: How can this be? For some people, the Virgin Birth has been the great detour for faith. Biologically, we know it’s impossible. It defies logic. As a student and lover of nature, I agree. But, there are other things I cannot explain or understand. Does the light streaming through our window consist of particles or waves? How does gravity pull objects to the earth? Where does love come from? And why does the attraction holding people together appear as if by magic and sometimes disappear as if by a curse?

The literal translation of Mary’s question is more pointed. The Greek says, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” The answer does not address biology. It does speak directly to the nature of God, the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High. “Therefore the child to be born will be holy.” So often our faith bogs down on

the question of ‘how.’ How can a little, country church that has never had a fulltime pastor ever afford to call its own minister? How can the Korean Presbyterians send out more foreign missionaries than any other denomination in the world? How can a busy person find time to be an elder? Or, teach Sunday School? How can a marginal Christian be a church leader? How could anyone with a family ever feed the homeless on Christmas? How could God contradict what it means to be divine and become an ordinary human being?

I’m sure Mary’s mind rebelled at the thought of what Gabriel was saying. Her heart raced with pious fear at such intimacy with the divine. Her stomach churned with more questions. Her sense of self, her soul, must have felt inadequate. Legend says she was barely more than a child, still struggling with teenage angst and all the contradictions of her own identity. One part excited, two parts grateful, and seven parts scared to death.

At this point in the conversation (and we should notice that this is a dialogue between Mary and Gabriel), the wisdom of providence comes into play. The angel tells her, in effect, she’s not alone in this drama. “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.”

Some challenges in life must be faced alone. I don’t think child bearing is one of them. I have observed that few people are as important to a pregnant woman as

the presence of other women, especially other women who are also pregnant. God provided an older relative six months further along to walk with Mary. Certainly Elizabeth's companionship is a comfort, someone to talk about the physical changes; a friend who would also heard neighbors gossiping, and another first timer.

As important for Mary and for us, however, is the confirmation of God's intervention. Here is another miraculous birth. Old women are not supposed to have babies. Of course, it had happened before in the history of Israel. Sarah laughed at the prospect of giving birth in her dotage. Hannah had all but given up. But, remember that each time this had happened; the result was a child who would play a key role in God's plan. Isaac confirmed God's promise of a people for Abraham. It was Hannah's son Samuel who anointed David, confirming him as king of Israel. And, Elizabeth would confirm Gabriel's announcement just as John would announce the Messiah.

"For nothing will be impossible with God." Not only will God make the impossible come true, God will provide all that Mary needs to live out this impossible dream. I believe it was the news about Elizabeth's pregnancy that tips the balance in favor of Mary's faith. Finally, she assents. "Here am I; the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary's confession of faith at the conclusion of the annunciation is a wonderful example for us. But let me

offer a caution. Do not rush too quickly to the end of this conversation. Do not forget Mary's questioning spirit, her curiosity, even her doubt when she asks, "How can this be?" By the time she accepts the part assigned to her by God, she has heard the whole story or as much as God is ready to reveal. She has voiced her concern. She knows something of what's ahead. This is Mary's informed consent.

When God sends a messenger to you with an assignment you cannot imagine, it's OK to ask some questions. We may not understand the explanation fully, but some dialogue is important. Scripture tells us time and again about arguments with the Almighty. Zechariah was skeptical about his ability to father a child with Elizabeth. Joseph was troubled about Mary's condition. Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me." The will of God does not trample our free will. Mary said, "Here am I," because she was willing to be the servant of the Lord.

No one can say what part you and I will play in God's plans for the coming year. It's likely there will be surprises. We may be pushed beyond our comfort zone and asked to do tasks for which we are unprepared. It may be a sick friend or a needy stranger. It may involve a prominent position or a quiet job completely out of sight. Either sacrifices or rewards could come your way. However, when the messenger comes, listen carefully. Listen for evidence of grace. You may be favored in some crazy way with the unexpected grace of God enabling you to say, "Here am I." Here am I.