

Troubled by Grace
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Holy God of Advent, it is hard to rejoice when all that we see around us is chaos. May we each tilt an ear to the good news of your holy messenger during this time and in this space we call sanctuary. As we unravel your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The figure of Mary fascinates me! You know this woman; she's visible in all four of the Gospels in the New Testament. You know this woman; she was just an ordinary Jewish girl when the Angel Gabriel appeared to her - young 14 or 15 years old in age. I know many Roman Catholics who adore Mary and when talking about her they would most certainly use a word like "fascinated" when referring to her. But for someone like me – a Protestant who comes to this Mary from a different angle - this fascination with her is a surprising feeling.

I would say that I identify with Mary, but to simply identify does not do it for me. Eugene Petersen's translation of the Bible called *The Message* shares with us the story from a more current perspective. Lets look at the story I am talking about here.

"It was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a young Jewish girl who was to be married to a man descended from the House of David. His name was Joseph, and the young Jewish girl's name was Mary." Upon entering the scene, the Angel Gabriel greeted the young girl and said:

Hi! Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you!

Mary felt the hair on the back of her neck rise and her eyes opened there widest to take in this, this – she didn't know! A man? A ghost? She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. Wouldn't you be shaken too? I know that I would freak out if an angel appeared to me and said, "Good morning, you're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out, God be with you!" I would be shaking in my boots wondering how I had become so mad and crazy that I was envisioning an angel appearing to me telling me that I am beautiful!

Seeing her expression, the angel said hastily, "Don't be frightened, Mary." The angel's voice was so kind, so concerned, so – calming – she suddenly cease to be any where near calm. The angel then assured Mary that she was not crazy and that she did not have to feel shaken. Instead the angel assured her, "Mary you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you! You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus."

Now, I am certainly not a woman but imagine with me for a second how it would feel? What would be running through your mind? Surprise you are going to be pregnant - and not only pregnant but pregnant with the Son of God!

Much like our world, this young, unwed, Jewish girl – this Mary – lived during a time of enormous, inescapable violence. She lived during a time when premarital pregnancy was glared, scowled and frowned upon. She was a girl who could have been beaten, stoned and killed because of her unwed pregnancy. She was a daughter who could have been disowned and banished from her family's village – left to survive the cultural, societal and natural

elements on her own at 14 or 15 years old. Its no wonder Mary was afraid, wouldn't you be afraid too?

The Angel Gabriel continued to reassure Mary in all of her confusion and complexity saying that her newborn baby "Will be great, be called Son of the Highest. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever – no end, ever, to his kingdom."

Mary then interrupted the Angel and asked a bit of a logistical question. "But how? How will I become pregnant?" The Angel Gabriel answered,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
The power of the Highest hovers over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
Will be called Holy, Son of God.

The angel stopped and eyed Mary quizzically, and seeing that she still seemed bewildered and troubled, added, almost conversationally "You should know this, too! Your aged kinswoman Elizabeth? The one they call 'barren'?" Mary nodded. "Well, she has conceived a son also. She's in her sixth month! With God, nothing's impossible."

Well, that did it for Mary. The initial confusion and fear that had seemed to inundate her encounter with the angel evaporated. Understanding rushed down like flooding waters, filling her first with relief and then with exquisite joy. She then stood straight up, looked directly at the angel and simply said, "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say."

Wow. How amazing is it to see Mary go from a state of utter confusion and fear to overwhelming joy and servitude. Earlier in the story when the Angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary, some interpretations of the Bible interpret Mary was "troubled" after the Angel said "Hi." I think we can infer, that after the Angel told Mary that she was going to conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit, that she was even more troubled.

See, the reason why I identify with Mary is because I am also troubled. God has not told me that I am going to conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit but God has said 'Hi' to me too. And God has said 'Hi' to each and every one of you. In fact, God's said plenty more besides 'Hi' to all of us.

Like Mary, I'm troubled because I can't even begin to explain why God would speak to me. Troubled because I can't even begin to explain why God would want to use me. Troubled because I know how often I fall short. For the most part I think that I am only ordinary, and therefore not "good enough." Troubled because I know how often I engage in cultural and societal practices that are not justice oriented. From the clothes that I wear on my back that are produced in factories and countries that exploit children and women and unfair wages, to the constant feeling to need more and more and then engage in acts of immediate gratification. I am troubled because I find this journey of faith so hard in the world that we live in. Troubled because I have so many unanswered questions. Do you ever feel like this?

And if all that isn't bad enough, I'm confused too. Does God know what God is doing? If I were in God's shoes, then I would not be the first person I would choose. I wouldn't even be my own plan B.

With all of that said, I have a sneaky suspicion, I have an inclination of how Mary felt at that very moment. I am sure Mary would have said the same thing at the moment of the Annunciation. Why me, O God? I am not good enough.

We are human. We are broken. We are not perfect. Of course, we should be troubled and confused, because how the heck is God going to use us?

One word. Grace.

What is this grace you might ask? When talking about the nature of God's role and the people's role, we must remember that, ultimately, only God knows for sure how it is accomplished in the lives of people. Since we are talking about the work of a transcendent God in finite people, there remain certain mysteries, which we may not comprehend in this life. With that being said, let us wonder for a moment what this grace may be. Let us take Mary, or let us take you, or how about we take me. Mary, you and I are ordinary people. We live in our ordinary worlds and we do ordinary things. Yet, God has done something extraordinary. God has said "Hi" to each one of us: Mary, you, me. Yet we have done nothing to deserve such a greeting. This God has shined his favor on us in all of mundane and ordinary ways to do something great. This is grace.

The Christian narrative is all about grace. The Advent story is all about grace. This life of faith is all about grace - pure and undeserved grace. Because of grace Mary found favor with God. Because of grace we have found favor with God, we have been made beautiful in God's sight. Isn't that wonderful? Something so undeserved, and yet so freely poured out for each one of us?

In our story this morning we hear the Angel Gabriel's welcome to Mary "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" or "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you." This is the good news people. This is the good message. You and me. Everyone. We're all made beautiful in God's sight through grace - pure and undeserved grace, even in our troubled and confused states.

When we leave here today, I hope that we can leave feeling a bit more like Mary, overwhelmed by grace. I hope that we can leave this sanctuary so transformed by grace that we become the Lord's servants in all of our troubled, confused and ordinary ways to do unordinary acts of justice, kindness and mercy. Let us wear this beauty of grace. Let us know this love of God and carry it as messengers like the Angel Gabriel and spread it in a world that so desperately needs to hear it. Amen.