

“The Most Important Conversation”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then 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.

In 1943, *Psychology Review* ran an article by Abraham Maslow exploring what he described as a hierarchy of needs: physiological (including food, water, warmth, and rest), safety (for example, security), belongingness and love (which would include intimate relationships, friends), esteem (that being prestige and feeling of accomplishment), self-actualization (or achieving one's full potential, including creative activities). We know these today as “Maslow's Hierarchy,” or simply “Maslow.”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published *On Death and Dying* in 1969. In this seminal work she described the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These are now known simply as the “Five Stages of Grief” or “Kubler-Ross.”

I suspect that most of us know of these two insights in some form or another. We may know the details or we may just recognize the names as referring to something important—but know them we do.

Each of these paradigms was a breakthrough when shared with the wider world, but they are now seen as being so obvious it's hard to believe people didn't always know them. We can now look at our own lives and recognize these progressions, which tell us that we can't simply go from A to Z, but we must first pass through to B and then C and so forth, until the end.

Well, Maslow and Kubler-Ross weren't the first to identify a progression in processing things or achieving fulfillment. Long before these two scholars penned their works, Luke recognized a similar dynamic at work in one of the pivot points of the Gospel: the Annunciation.

Like many of the most famous stories in Scripture, the Annunciation suffers from the curse of familiarity. We know this story so well, we forget to focus on just how stunning, unusual, and incredible the events really are. We fail to really consider what is going on because we immediately focus on a vague memory of a piece of Renaissance Art. Perhaps it's a work by Fra Angelico, Botticelli, or Filippo Lippi. Others, too, have depicted this moment over the years: van Eyck, Rossetti, El Greco. And not just Europeans. Latin Americans, and Africans have been moved to capture the encounter between Mary and the Angel Gabriel. Many of these works are truly masterpieces. But they are all missing something: the dynamism of an actual conversation, the inflection, the body language, the way in which things are said.

Not to be glib, but this story, surreal in so many ways, can be seen as unintentionally amusing. It would've made a perfect Monty Python skit, with the late Graham Chapman playing Gabriel and Eric Idle, wearing a wig of course, standing in for Mary. There is so much that is odd and humorous in the pacing of what is one of the most important conversations—if not *the* most important conversation in all of Scripture, along with that between Mary Magdalen and the Angel in the Garden on Easter morning.

Now, there are a lot of important, engaging conversations in Scripture, so why do I give this one pride of place? Because it is here that we see God and humans coming together in partnership, with the most fruitful result possible: Jesus, son of God and heir to David; Jesus, fully human and fully divine. And all of this was possible because of the progression we see unfold in this passage, in which Mary plays a vital role in God's plan and the story of Jesus.

In short, we have a movement from silence to questioning to loving obedience to God. But let's look at this story in detail.

It opens with the Angel Gabriel being sent by God to share some news with a virgin in a backwater town. This Gabriel was the same one sent to inform Elizabeth, Mary's relative, of the coming birth of *her* son, John. When Gabriel appears to Mary, he greets her by calling her "favored one." And then, he adds the news that the Lord is with her. *We* know what's about to come. *We* know that being a young, unwed mother at any time is a challenge, and we may well be skeptical, asking "Is this how God shows his favor?"

Mary's initial response, though, is one of silence. As we are told, she is perplexed. She doesn't freak out, she doesn't scoff, she is simply silent in the face of this greeting. Why

on earth was God sending an emissary to *her*? Even in the ancient world, where angels talked with humans and the boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms seen as somewhat permeable, this was a stunning development. But Mary should not have been completely surprised. After all, we know that throughout the history of Israel, God chose to deal with the outsiders, people of no account, the so-called nobodies. Mary is *exactly* the type of person who would find favor in God's sight. Yet here she just stands in silence. Upon reflection, her response makes a lot of sense: Mary needs a moment to process this incredible event.

It is then that things begin to get truly strange: Gabriel proceeds to tell her that she is so favored by God that she will conceive a son, who will be king, and that all sorts of good things will happen.

And this is when Mary moves from silence to questioning. Her query is direct and to the point: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Clearly, Mary knew about the birds and the bees. She had not been intimate with anyone, including her fiancé Joseph, and so no child was possible. The idea of a baby being brought into being didn't make sense. End of discussion. Now, some of you say you've read or heard of some translations where Mary is not a virgin but a "young woman"; the Hebrew, you recall someone saying, had been mistranslated. Perhaps, but frankly, that deprives the story of its miraculous *oomph*. Jesus' birth is remembered by the Church as an honest-to-goodness, work-of-God miracle. Let's not lose sight of that truth. But back to the story: what's interesting to me is that Mary's question is marked by curiosity, not resistance or rejection. She has accepted that she is talking with an angel, and his message therefore cannot be dismissed out of hand—he is an emissary from God, after all.

Gabriel provides a straightforward answer to her question: "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."

In other words, Gabriel tells her the "how," offering supporting evidence in the form of Elizabeth's pregnancy and then Divine assurance of all that can be done.

And then we come to the crux of the story, in some ways the pivot on which the Gospel itself turns: Mary's next action.

Did you notice that, in essence, God leaves it to Mary to choose whether any of this will happen? I firmly believe that Mary—knowing the trouble she would get into with family and neighbors, the difficulties she might have with Joseph, the very real danger of the law being brought down on her with the prospect of being stoned—had the opportunity

to demur. She could have told Gabriel thanks, but no, she'd rather take a pass on this supposed blessing. Her skepticism, her doubts, her pragmatism could have ruled the day. But they didn't.

Taking into consideration all she knew about the God of Israel, weighing the risks inherent in giving her consent to what Gabriel was describing, Mary gives God her loving obedience and agrees.

Some modern scholars have suggested that this story describes an act of violence, a violation of Mary, but I must disagree. That argument presupposes a deity very much unlike the loving, merciful God that is described in the Bible—whom I, and I hope you, have come to know.

I'm not saying that God does not ask hard things of us. Abraham leaving home for a new land was not easy. Moses assuming the mantle of leadership was not easy. David accepting the call to kingship while a homicidal Saul was still on the throne was not easy. Mary being called to be the mother of the one would be the Christ was not easy.

But she did what she was called to do, after having a conversation with the messenger of God, the Angel Gabriel. That call was an invitation into life with God, not a command demanding obeisance.

“Will you help bring the Son of God into the world, so that God might take on human flesh, and experience all that humans go through from birth to death, and bring hope and peace to all people?” Confronted by this question, Mary, after her silence, after her questioning, gave her loving obedience and answered, “Yes!”

That God favored Mary, and not a wife of Herod or one of the Chief Priests, tells us much about the way in which God works: Mary was of low estate, but her faith, her integrity, her mettle were, to use a trite phrase, “world-class”—all qualities she would need being the mother of her special son.

As a mother, Mary had to contend with much in her life. Jesus was a bright, precocious child who, Luke tells, was separated as a boy from his family's caravan because he stayed at the temple engaging in discussion and disputation with his learned elders. He must have been challenging as an adult, going off to be an itinerant preacher who, among other things, said strange things about who was really a member of his family. And as a religious and public figure, he must have brought great worry to his mother, who ultimately saw her son, her boy, die on a cross.

Yet she believed in him and her God, even after the horrible events on Golgotha. God, she believed, was true to his promises. He said Jesus would bring redemption and reconciliation to the world, and Mary knew it was her love, her nurture, that informed her son's every move in life.

Perhaps God would have gone to another woman had Mary said no. Frankly, we do not know. But what if God had decided she was the only one whom he wanted to be Jesus' mother, and if she wasn't interested in that role, then he would not come to earth in human form. Her rejection could have been the end of everything. And so, that is why it is in *that* moment—when she was talking with Gabriel, having the most important conversation ever—that she opened the door to everything that followed.

Thanks be to God! And thanks be to Mary!