

**Gospel: Luke 1:26-38**

The angel Gabriel was sent from God  
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,  
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,  
of the house of David,  
and the virgin's name was Mary.  
And coming to her, he said,  
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."  
But she was greatly troubled at what was said  
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.  
Then the angel said to her,  
"Do not be afraid, Mary,  
for you have found favor with God.

"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,  
and you shall name him Jesus.  
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,  
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,  
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,  
and of his kingdom there will be no end."  
But Mary said to the angel,  
"How can this be,  
since I have no relations with a man?"  
And the angel said to her in reply,  
"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 called holy, the Son of God.  
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,  
has also conceived a son in her old age,  
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;  
for nothing will be impossible for God."  
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.  
May it be done to me according to your word."  
Then the angel departed from her.

**Gospel Study: *Blessed Are You***

I read the story this past week about a young boy who was shining shoes outside of Grand Central station in New York City. He was shining these shoes with his cloth, going back and forth, over this big black shoe at his chin. In front of him there was this little medal that was dangling from his neck and the man whose shoes he was shining was absorbed by this medal and finally said to the little boy, "Son, what is that medal around your neck?" And the boy responded, "It's a medal of Jesus' mother Mary." The man looked at the little boy and said, "Son, why would you have a medal of her? There's no difference between her and your mother." A little surprised

the young boy looked up and simply said, "That may be, but there sure is a big difference between their sons."

That young boy had good diplomacy, and I would suggest, had a good theology. On the one hand, we want to remember that Mary was human, like you and like me. On the other hand, I think we want to remember that God had chosen her specially to be the mother of Jesus, and thus holds a special place of honor in all of human history. I want to say today that as I look out and observe people—and particularly some Christian sentiment on different things such as devotion to Mary—I observe that there are two extremes I would caution us to avoid.

The first extreme that I have noticed among some Christian people are those who place Mary on such a high pedestal that they forget her words that she was the lowly servant of the Lord. They seem to present her on such center stage, and on such a bright spot light, that I think no one would be more upset about that than Mary herself. Would you agree? It seems that some people almost suggest that she's a type of Goddess which I think would be idolatry and blasphemy. Although their intentions may be very good, they could miss the most important virtue of Mary, which was her humility that, as mother of Jesus, always wants to lead us to her son Jesus. I would caution us against being so overly zealous, or pious, that we forget Mary's role which is to bring Christ to us.

On the other hand, I also observe among Christian people today, some who want to place Mary in the back closet and want to practically forget about her and not show her any place of honor because they insist we must pray to Jesus. We must focus exclusively on Jesus and it is wrong to look to anybody else. I think that is another extreme and mistake because if we are to imitate Jesus, did not the Lord Himself honor His mother and present her, as I think, the very first and finest disciple of His? I think we really miss the point and upset the Lord if we do not give to Mary the recognition of her significant role in Salvation history. It is not just an historic moment of the past, but I think she can help us, and lead us, just as any good mother here would intercede for their children. I can't tell you how many mothers have come up to me to say, "Father, pray with me for my son or my daughter who's away from Church and neglecting his or her religion." And I think, "Boy, that person, that child, is blessed with a blessed mother." And it's through their prayers of intercession, and their inspiration, that I think and hope will lead that child back to the Lord and to His church.

I think that is the case with Mary; I suggest, we just need to keep it in a balance and in a perspective. I also suggest that the way for us to look at Mary—and regard Mary in her significant role—is to carefully and prayerfully study this Gospel on Mary's Annunciation. Then I would suggest out of this text, and in this context, we may come to a truly theological and ecumenical balance of a proper devotion and attention to Mary; avoiding either of the two extremes I previously mentioned.

So allow me to lead us in a brief reflection on this Gospel of the Annunciation. It begins, as you'll recall, with the angel Gabriel being sent by God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph of the House of David and the virgin's name was Mary. This brief background information is critically important because, first of all, it establishes twice in this two-sentence introduction, the mention of Mary as a virgin. This is critical to our Christian tradition that holds Mary's virginity, which sets the stage for establishing Jesus' divinity, so that we know from the start this child to be born of Mary is no human child, but

conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is an extremely important point. It is why we look to Jesus not as just another great man or prophet, that many in the new age would say or suggest that Christ might be, but in fact we know Jesus as Son of God. This Annunciation established the foundation for this faith, so this is an extremely important point that I think we need to understand.

Secondly, we hear in this introduction to the Annunciation that Mary is already betrothed to Joseph. You realize of course that betrothal is the formal engagement and considering that, we can all appreciate the fact that this announcement of a pregnancy that's not conceived by Joseph would bring about major problems with her fiancé. In Matthew's Gospel we read that when Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant he immediately made plans to divorce her quietly. That tells you something about the nature of betrothal; it's almost as if they were already committed in marriage to each other. It also tells you something about this alarming, disturbing news of Mary's pregnancy. Also in Matthew's Gospel, the angel then comes to Joseph. In other words, the Annunciation happens to Joseph where the angel says to Joseph, "No, it is by the Holy Spirit that Mary has conceived this child and He is to be called Jesus, Son of God." Those are very important points that we need to understand as we try to take to heart now what the angel says. I hope we can believe, and come to see, that the angel wants to say to us today exactly what was said to Mary then.

Upon arriving, the angel said, "Rejoice oh highly favored daughter, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." Those of us Catholics recognize the first part of the Hail Mary. Hail Mary, Ave Maria, Rejoice Mary, Oh Highly Favored One...favor there is the same as grace, which is gift of God. The angel's announcing, "You are so full of God's goodness." This is pure gift, it's not Mary's doing, it's just that she was so receptive, and open to that gift, that grace, and the message is—the most beautiful message that any of us could ever hear—*the Lord is with you*. The Lord is with you. Mary was deeply troubled by these words. I guess we would be too, wouldn't we? If some angel appeared to us we would be so amazed. I wonder what these words meant?

The angel went on to say to her, "Do not fear Mary." That's always what God wants to say, and throughout His life Jesus kept saying that: "Don't fear." If anything stands in the way as a wall between God and us, it's fear. Out of fear we keep distance from the Lord. Fear doesn't enable us to take to heart the words of the Gospel. Jesus says, "Do not fear" to us, just as the angel said it to Mary. *You have found favor with God*. Again, the angel repeats, trying to teach through repetition. You've found favor; you've been blessed. Among all women you've been chosen. You shall conceive and bear a son and give Him the name Jesus. In Hebrew that name Jesus means, *God saves us*. Wow. A God given name. That name represents the very mission of Jesus in this world. God saves us.

The angel goes on to say, "Great will be His dignity. He will be called 'Son of Most High.' The Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father. He will rule over the House of Jacob forever and of His rule there will be no end." And so, overwhelming, as you can imagine. Picture Mary, it's completely incomprehensible. I mean, she says, "How can this be? I'm just a lowly country girl. I'm just a simple young lady. How can this be?" And then realizing the significance of being impregnated by the Spirit says, "I do not know man." Of course you understand 'know' is the Biblical euphemism for sexual intercourse. Suggesting this powerful sexual intimacy. I have not had any sexual relations with any man. So how can this come to be? And the angel said

to her, "Well it won't be your doing. It won't be Joseph's doing. The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you." Hence the Holy offspring to be born will be called the Son of God. God the Father is the real father of this Son. And so, we see again here, a re-statement, of the divine origin of Jesus' conception and Jesus' life. He truly is the Son of God. Unlike any other time in human history then, we have a conception by the Holy Spirit.

Now you can imagine how much sense this would make to a young lady like Mary. How could she possibly understand this, much less the ramifications of all this? But still, without understanding she says, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." And with that the angel left her. It's interesting to look at Mary's life because from the first moment of Jesus' conception, to the last breath of Jesus' life, Mary continually prays, "Let it be." We see this at her Annunciation, and we see this at the Crucifixion. At the Crucifixion, many of us can picture it in our minds, the beautiful statue, the Pieta. You know *pieta* is the Italian word for *Let it be*. And when Mary held the body of her divine Son Jesus, after being so cruelly crucified, without ever understanding why, again she prayed, "Let it be."

That is the prayer of her heart throughout her life. That is her greatest virtue, that she trusted God so completely in the mystery of it all. And because of that, she is the best model of a disciple for us today. We who want to live the Christian life, we would do well to look at her as an example and model for ourselves. It is a wonderful point of the Church's wisdom to present us this Gospel a week before we celebrate the Nativity of Jesus. It seems that the Church implies to truly come to understand the birth of Christ today in ourselves, we will do well to understand how Mary first conceived the Christ-child in her. Because it's going to happen much the same way.

Let me present it this way to you. Try this for a moment. Imagine in your own mind's eye, the Evangelist Luke, coming and appearing to you. Keep in mind the very word for angel is the same Greek word used for Evangelist. Both are messengers. Now Luke comes and stands before us. Imagine Luke standing at this podium and he appears before us today and greets us much like any priest or minister would greet the people before a service, saying, "The Lord be with you." And as Luke says that can you imagine feeling a sense of the Lord's presence and then Luke says these words that were said to Mary, "Blessed are you among men and women. Rejoice for I have some good news for you." That may make us worry a little, huh? Like wait a minute, maybe something's wrong with this picture.

But Luke would want to assure us, as any messenger of the Lord, "Do not fear. Don't fear God. Don't stay at a distance. God has found favor with you. God favors you. God loves you. Can you believe that?" Luke is up here as a messenger of God wanting to bring home this Gospel, this good news, can you believe God has found favor with you? And then, he announces to us that Jesus wants to come and live in you this Christmas. Jesus wants to come and be born into our hearts spiritually, in the same way that Jesus was born into Mary's womb physically. And we would respond, I would imagine, how can this be? How can this possibly be? Admitting and knowing our own spiritual poverty; our own inability. We would say, 'How can this be? I'm not that holy. Wait a minute, Jesus wants to come and live in me, just the way He lived in Mary? Wait a minute. How can I possibly believe that?' Luke would want to say the same to us, what he said to Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God." It's not you, it's the power of the Holy Spirit that will come upon you. It won't be because of what you do, it will be what God's doing. That's what grace is. God going to work in our lives. And so then, I would imagine, before Luke would leave us, he would leave us with these words, "Well, do you believe it? Can you conceive it? That God

will achieve it?" Believe it, that you can conceive it, that God would achieve it. And so we can receive it this Christmas.

If you can picture that then you understand this Gospel. I believe that the reason Luke is telling this story to his church yesterday, and to the church today, is because this is the message of Christmas. This is the Gospel that we need to hear and understand and take to heart that Jesus came into the world, not to be born in some kind of vacuum out there, but right in here. Born into every heart of every man and woman who would believe Him and receive Him. That is good news. I believe one way, perhaps in my meditation the best way, that we could be encouraged to be open to that, is by joining with Mary in praying for that just as she did. Let it be Lord.

Mary, who was the first to believe and receive Christ, will teach us how to be impregnated by the Spirit into our life; into that part of our family that's so barren, that's so impossible. Or that situation at work where God, I've asked you to come, I can't imagine how you come into this situation, I can't imagine how you can make a difference with this problem. And ask and invite the Lord to come and to trust that that's what Jesus wants to do. Mary helps us now like a midwife, one who has already mothered and birthed this labor process that we need to go through with her. And we could allow the Lord to live so much in us and to grow in us just as the Christ child grew in the womb with Mary that we then, like Mary will come to share Christ with others. That's the miracle that God wants to work in all of our hearts. If we can understand that, if we can believe that, if we can conceive that. God will achieve that. And then, the angel of the Lord would say to us—the angel who is a messenger, Luke—Evangelist Luke or that preacher or teacher of the Gospel would say to us, I think, as the angel said to Mary, blessed are you too, among men and women.

I would ask us to take a few moments and to quietly at first think about that posture of prayer that we need to assume in this next week. You know we're coming into Christmas, things are getting so hectic and busy, probably, and I think we need to find that place, like Mary did, where we can allow these words, which is the seed of God's life, to really implant itself in our hearts. So that this birth can happen in us. Amen.