

Why Mary?

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The 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. 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." Then 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.

You've got to wonder: Why Mary? Of all the young girls in first-century Palestine, why did the Angel Gabriel appear to Mary?

And Mary herself, it seems, was a tad confused. The angel shows up and says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” And then Luke adds, “But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

Yeah, I guess. Imagine Mary. She’s just finished supper and loading the dishwasher. She was heading up to her room to do her homework. Check her Facebook page and maybe send a couple of text messages. Just a few short months before high-school graduation, after all. She’s been working on her college application essay for weeks now.

Ever since school started in the fall, Mary had her eye on this guy named Joseph. Joe was a wide-receiver on the football team and small forward on the basketball team. They were undefeated in the regular season last year, but Joe sprained his ankle in the final game and missed the tournament. The team was eliminated in the second round. They’d been dating for months now, Joe and Mary, and only last week, on her birthday, Mary got an engagement ring.

They were still working out their plans. Like Mary, Joe was a senior, though he wasn’t sure he wanted to go to college. Might just stay in town. He was good with his hands and wanted to set up a carpentry shop.

Mary had just settled in at her laptop, punched out a couple of e-mails to her friends. She yelled at her annoying younger brother to turn his music down so she could concentrate. Calculus homework was always a challenge. She plugged her earbuds into the iPod, and just as she reached for her Evian bottle, she saw a bright light outside the window. Then a voice: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Huh? Who is this joker? “Favored one?” Nobody talks like that. What is this guy’s problem?

But the exchange gets even more bizarre. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” How does this guy know my name, Mary wonders. But he continues: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Huh? According to Luke’s narrative, “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’” Yeah, right. Hello? Tell me, Angel Guy, did you, like, fall asleep during sex-education class?

And on it goes. Gabriel proceeds to lay out the process. “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.”

What is Mary thinking at this moment? My parents are going to be furious; they want me to go to college. And how am I supposed to explain this to Joseph? I mean, Joe’s a good guy and all, but you can’t really ask a high-school senior to start out married life as a stepfather, arguably the most thankless job in the entire world.

It’s a strange conversation, no doubt about it. And we certainly could forgive Mary if she had said, “Why me? Why not pick on someone else?”

But she doesn’t. Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

And nothing, ever, has been the same since.

The story of the Annunciation, the appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, reminds us that Jesus came to earth not in princely style befitting a king, but in humble and lowly circumstances. Mary was a peasant girl, not a princess. And Jesus was born in a stable, not at Mount Sinai or Griffin Hospital in Derby.

And the final lesson of the Annunciation is that the works of God require human cooperation. What if Mary had said no. She had every right, of course. It's not difficult to imagine her saying, "No, I really can't be bothered. I have my life to live. I want to get married and go to college. Joseph and I have imagined a life together, and being an unwed mother really doesn't fit into my plans."

But Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

May we say the same: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Third Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2011
Christ Church
Middle Haddam, Connecticut