

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Now when King David was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

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.

On Tuesday last week the four-year old class from our Weekday School enacted the Christmas story for everyone who could come. Shirley Gunn was at the door handing out programs, grinning from ear-to-ear, eagerly announcing that this particular gathering is her favorite event of the entire season. The sanctuary was filled with parents, grandparents, and younger siblings; along with a knowing group of church members who, I suspect, had the date circled on their calendars for months. Children of every age were equipped with homemade bells, which rang gleefully throughout the program.

We were a little late getting started because several members of the Giraffe Class needed to make last-minute stops at the bathroom. While we waited, Alice Patton explained to us that the class had been practicing for quite a while, but rotating which children acted out which role, so that each child had a chance to be an angel and a shepherd. Every little boy had a chance to be Joseph. Every little girl had a chance to be Mary. But no one knew ahead of time who would play which roles on Tuesday. It was just another telling of the story. Except this time there were costumes. And this time there was an audience.

When the four-year-olds finally assembled at the door, it was worth the wait just to see them file down the aisle, resplendent in their costumes, merrily greeting their loved ones with waves and kisses, occasionally seeking out a reassuring hug.

On Tuesday it was Kyley's turn to be Mary. Later, her teacher, Mistie Cogbill, would tell me that Kyley had been excited when she was informed that she would get to play the part, and she was beautiful in her blue drape, taking her first few steps down the aisle with Joseph. But at some point the journey took an unexpected turn for Kyley. At some point she realized that she hadn't signed up for all of us. By the time she settled on the front steps with her teacher, Mistie; and her partner, Joseph; Kyley's regret was clear. Even from my seat two-thirds of the way back, I could see Kyley shaking her head "no" and wiping what must have been tears from her beautiful face. With Mistie's help Kyley made it through, but it was painfully clear that we'd asked her to do something that was truly hard for her.

I've seen a lot of Christmas pageants over the years, some more memorable than others, but I won't soon forget this pixie-Mary bravely playing her part with tears on her cheeks and her head shaking "no".

Kyley helped me to imagine how hard it must have been to be Mary.

When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, she already is betrothed to Joseph—her future has been set in motion. In all likelihood, a bride price has been exchanged and a contract signed, but the relationship will not be consummated until the week-long wedding feast, still off in the future.

Scholars tell us that the minimum age for betrothal under Roman law was 10 and the minimum age for marriage was 12. [See footnotes in Joel Green's commentary on Luke.] It is believed that first-century Jewish practices paralleled these Roman standards. During the period of betrothal, girls would have remained in their father's house. Most would have been married by the age of 12 ½. So Kylie may have been much closer in age to the real Mary than the 30-somethings who often hold their babies in our Christmas pageants—but is that how we picture Mary?

Over the centuries, the millennia, Mary has become fixed in our imaginations, faithful, submissive, obedient... We unpack her during Advent, set her up in our nativity scenes, and then box her up neatly when the holy days are past.

And why not? What else would we do with her? For many of us Mary is a remote figure, other-worldly. She is not warm and lively in our imaginations; we do not conceive of her as someone who ever lost her patience, whose skin became wrinkled with age.

To do so would be to suggest that she is a lot like us, but how can we claim kinship with the one chosen by God to shelter the Messiah? We are encouraged by tradition to think of her as the paragon of virtue, the image of faithful response—. I don't think those are attributes any of us would use to describe ourselves.

So we have placed Mary on a pedestal, a safe distance from the lives we lead. But the more I read the book of Luke, the more I am convinced that such thinking does violence to the gospel he shares with us.

Luke seems to go out of his way to present Mary as an ordinary girl. Unlike the first characters he introduces, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary is given no pedigree.

The angel Gabriel appears twice in Luke's gospel: first to announce the birth of John the Baptist and then to announce the birth of Jesus. We're meant to compare the two stories—similar in some ways, but so different in others. When the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, he appears to a mature man, a priest

even—and where is he? —In the holy city, in the temple, by the altar—engaged in prayer. Zechariah and his wife are described as righteous, blameless before the law. They seem like perfect candidates to be parents of a holy child.

But Mary? She's a young girl still living in her father's house, not even married. —And Mary's not hanging out in the temple; she's about as far from Jerusalem as a Jewish girl could get. Mary is from Nazareth in Galilee, even further North than Samaria—it's an insignificant, despised, unclean sort of place—not exactly where you'd expect God to go looking for a nice family for the Messiah.

Mary is a poor girl from a backwater community. She is a person seemingly without power. When her engagement period ends, she will move from her father's house to her husband's—passing from one man's possession into another's. What she thinks, what she believes—what does that matter? Except to God. Except to the whole beloved, aching world.

And how does the encounter unfold? When Gabriel first addresses Mary he tells her that she is graced with the presence of God. Surely this is good news, but notice how Mary reacts. She is much perplexed, she needs to ponder what sort of greeting this might be. She seems wary.

Someone once told me that draft notices in the Vietnam era used to begin this same way. They began with the word “Greetings.” Think what a mixture of emotions that small word must have unleashed. Some greetings unsettle us to our core.

But the word translated here as “Greetings” is really the word for joy—and that's an intriguing way for the message to begin. Now if Gabriel had appeared to Mary's cousin Elizabeth that word would have made perfect sense to me. After all, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been praying for a child for many years.

Elizabeth is like other famous Biblical women: Sarah, Hannah, Rachel. Described as barren, they are unable to have children. Each of them prays fervently to God for the gift of a child. And it's not hard to understand their prayers. To be childless in *our* culture, if you long for children, can be deeply painful, but to be childless in their cultures was to be ostracized; it could even be grounds for divorce. So when these women's prayers are answered, when they conceive, they rejoice, for their disgrace is no more.

But it's a different ballgame for Mary. Mary's pregnancy doesn't promise to remove social stigma, it promises to create it. The result of infertility might be divorce, but the result of pregnancy outside of marriage could be death. Females finding themselves in this circumstance could be stoned. We miss something crucial in this story if we don't understand that the angel's visit leaves Mary at great risk.

Nevertheless, Gabriel begins with "joy." He assures Mary that she need not fear—she has found favor with God. Gabriel tells this young girl that she will conceive and bear a child--and what a child. He will be great, he'll inherit David's throne, and his reign will be endless!

But Mary doesn't respond to any of these images of greatness. One wonders if she hears anything at all after the announcement of her pregnancy. Her question, when it comes, is not about her son's eternal reign but about how a virgin can conceive.

Gabriel's lyrical response about being overshadowed by the Most High can't have been much help, so Gabriel comes down to earth and gives Mary something she can hold onto. He tells her that her relative Elizabeth also has conceived. He shows her a tangible sign of God at work in the world, *for nothing is impossible with God*.

If we were reading this story for the first time, I think we would be holding our breath right about now, waiting for a response from this confused and vulnerable young girl. Ultimately, when she responds with "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," we ought to be stunned.

With no economic or political resources—in the midst of great risk—this young girl offers to be God's vessel in her time and place, trusting Gabriel's promise that God's purpose is deeply mixed into her life.

It's easy to miss that Mary identifies herself as a servant of the Lord. But in so doing, she makes a radical claim. She declares that her primary allegiance is not to her father's house or to her fiancé's. She identifies herself as belonging to the household of God. Only God's love, God's claim is big enough to define her life. She knows to whom she belongs. She knows in whose service she will discover her freedom.

We need to be clear, though. When Mary says, *Let it be with me according to your word*, she has not moved in a few short verses from confusion to certainty. Mary makes her offer from the midst of her confusion. She says “yes” even as she shakes her head in wonder. She yields her life to a powerful word she does not understand, but instinctively trusts.

This would be a satisfying place to stop, but while we tend to fix Mary in this moment, Luke takes pains to remind us that her story goes on. Before our text for the day ends, the angel has departed. Mary is left to live into his promises as best she can. Never again are we told that she experiences an other-worldly presence.

Let your imagination run for a moment. Every indication is that Mary spent the rest of her life in Nazareth. What must that have been like for her? Did she hear her neighbors whisper everywhere she went?: a baby conceived before the wedding, a strange child who doesn't seem to know his place. a young man whose first sermon so enrages his neighbors that they try to throw him off a cliff. And then there is his death.

So, joy? Where is the joy for Mary?

On Tuesday morning Kylie was asking those kinds of questions in her four-year-old way. Surprised at the response she received from all of us gathered in the sanctuary, she kept asking her teacher, “Why are all the people smiling at me? Why are they happy for me?”

Indeed.

Yet joy is the word Gabriel speaks. Joy is the gift to God's people. And it is the right word. Gabriel's visit may have reduced Mary to tears—we don't know—but we do know it made her sing. We heard that song last week and we are singing phrases of it again this week: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” In effect:

My life makes it easier to see God. My life makes God's way visible.

Look at me, and learn about God.

Look at me and let the way you see the world be converted—for God has done great things for me.

None of us knows the part we will be asked to play on any given day, and it's not likely that any of us will feel prepared for the things God asks us to do. Yet it is our privilege—and our joy—to say “let it be with me according to your Word.” For nothing is impossible with God. There are no limits to the ways God would use us.

So no matter how settled your plans seem—or how awry your life has seemed to go—do not doubt that God wants to make God's home in you. God wants you to give birth to grace and mercy and justice in the world. You are the house—we are the house—God chooses.

So maybe don't pack Mary away with the nativity set this year. Let her hang around as a warm and lively conversation partner as you live through the coming year's challenges and discoveries.

Inhabit her joy.