

So nothing has happened yet—except Zechariah can't talk and Elizabeth is pregnant

However, at her age, that's something and they have a promise that the baby will be John

And that he will prepare the way of the Lord, turning the hearts of people to God

But that hasn't happened yet

All we really have is a man who is suddenly mute and an old woman who is pregnant

They still live under Roman rule in occupied territory

But this angel called Gabriel is pretty busy doing heavenly work these days

Next we find him in Nazareth where the young woman Mary lives

Mary is a virgin that is engaged to Joseph, of the royal house of King David

Suddenly the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, saying, "*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*"

When Mary is confused and wonders what is happening, Gabriel tells her to fear not!

Again reassurance to Mary comes before the message—don't be afraid

Then the angel proceeds with the most amazing message...

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." Luke 1:30-33 NRSV

But Mary questions Gabriel—"How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34 NRSV

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.

Luke 1:35 NRSV

This all seems surreal and I daresay that none of us is a virgin, giving birth to a baby

But God comes to us in this same manner

When we wonder at how it can be that God will use me

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,

and the power of the Most High will overshadow you

The presence of the Divine is with us and within us

It is in the power of the Holy that we are able to live out God's purposes

Gabriel tells Mary that her old relative, Elizabeth was also pregnant

And says, "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" Luke 1:37 NRSV

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

Luke 1:38 NRSV

I don't think Mary really had a clue what she was saying yes to

In the moment of God coming all the way to her, she said yes

Yes before she understood all of the implications of that yes

Yes to criticism and shame as a young, unwed mother

Yes without talking it over with Joseph and making an acceptable plan

Yes to going to Bethlehem and hunting for a place to give birth

Yes to being the mother of Jesus

Often at Christmas, the song "Mary, Did You Know" is sung

While the angel told her she would be the mother of the Son of God

I daresay she did not understand what that would mean

She had no clue of the pain and sorrow she would endure

In my experience, that is true for me as well
I rarely understand the full unfolding of the message given to me
I rarely really know what is next
God comes and we say yes—more to the journey of walking together
Than to the full implications as they unfold in our lives
Yet, God is present as they unfold—walking with us, Leading us

I love the next part of the Mary story... Mary goes to visit Elizabeth for about 3 months
At their meeting, the child in Elizabeth moved and Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit
"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Luke 1:42-45 NRSV

These two women created space for each other to wait
They affirmed for each other that something was happening and worth waiting for

Here we see a model for Christian community
It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation
in which we can lift up what has already begun in us
The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is what it means to form community,
to be together, gathered around a promise,
affirming what is happening among us

Yet, even in her wonderings about what is next, Mary speaks prophetically in Luke 1:46-55
And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

But what about Joseph? We find the story of Joseph in Matthew
Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant—presumably it is common knowledge in the town
Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. Matthew 1:19 NRSV

What does it mean that Joseph is a righteous man? Or a just man?
We generally assume that one who is just—obeys the rules and laws
But according to the Old Testament law, Mary should be stoned
So this just/righteous man planned to break the law and dismiss her quietly

The beginning of verse 20 has Joseph thinking about things
Various translations—thought, considered, resolved, etc.
Often meanings get lost in the translation
Greek word here can mean that he became angry and upset

We sometimes make Joseph out to be a patient, kind man
But he probably was angry that Mary had obviously slept with a man
Yet, he decides to respond with a justice that is compassionate
He breaks the law and plans to let Mary live, albeit not as his wife

But [while he fumed over this matter]¹, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:20-21 NRSV

Joseph is also told what is going on—another confirmation through the community
The message begins with the admonition to “fear not!” and trust God’s unfolding story

But the message comes—not when he is in a personally good space and ready for it
It comes in the midst of his emotions and frustration—even anger

I love that we don’t have to be all nice and in our best personal space
God comes to Joseph just as he is—even with raw emotion
The same is true of us—don’t whitewash the Biblical story
Or we remove the hope that God can come to us as well

Today’s story ends with... *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Matthew 1:24-25 NRSV*

Joseph did a very bold and courageous thing in taking Mary as his wife
He stood up to the community of Nazareth in taking Mary as his wife
At least some of the community would have stoned Mary
But after God came to him, he responded with the justice of compassion
He found way to move from anger to grace

Life will often seem unfair to us
Truth is that God’s coming doesn’t make everything easy and right
Yet in Listening to God, we can find our next steps
Accompanied by God, we can move into grace and compassion
With God’s presence with us, we can be bold and take our full place
Knowing that it is the next step
We don’t know what the rest of the journey holds
Yet, we Listen in community and do this work together

The One who comes is called, *Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.” Matthew 1:23 NRSV*
Emmanuel, God with us, is still coming today!

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, page 46