

Angels Among Us

“Nothing is Impossible for God - #morepeace”

[Luke 1:26-41](#)

Mary, the mother of Jesus is a point of division between Catholics and the Protestants. From the time the Council of Ephesus established the dogma of Mary in 431, all Christians honored Mary as their heavenly Mother until the Protestant Reformation -- a period of over 1000 years. And despite the critique of some Reformers, Mary continued to have a prominent place among early Protestants.

Actually, Martin Luther, the man who initiated the Reformation, has many quotes praising and honoring Mary. However, the Protestant Church gradually began to drop Mary from its liturgies and doctrines; and today, besides the season of Advent and Christmas, she is seldom recognized in the context of our worship.

This is not the case in the Catholic Church, where there is still great veneration and adoration of Mary. The Catholics hold Mary in a special place in their hearts and give her a unique position among all their saints. In the Catholic Church, there is not a single month in the year without several feasts in her honor.

Our Catholic brothers and sisters believe Mary was born perfectly without sin and had a special relationship with God -- chosen to share DNA with Jesus Christ. Due to her closeness with God, Mary is believed to have had her body and soul assumed into heaven at the end of her life on earth. She is not just called Mary: she is the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, and the Mother of the Church. Intercessory prayers are offered up to her. *Ave Maria*, the beautiful song that Franz Schubert wrote in 1825, which has become one of the most popular and moving wedding songs of all time, is actually a traditional Catholic prayer asking for the intercession of Mary.

So why do the Catholics have such honor and esteem for Mary? The answer to this question is based on today's scripture reading from the gospel of Luke. And I invite you now to join me in reflecting on the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary.

Today's text starts with these words, "Six months later." What happened six months prior to this? If you were here last Sunday, you know what happened. Six months before the angel Gabriel visited Mary, he visited Zechariah. To refresh your memory, here is a brief summary of last week's scripture.

Zechariah was a priest at the Jerusalem Temple in Judah. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were both good and righteous people. But, despite their devotion to God and blameless life, they had no children at their old, beyond child-bearing, age. Of course, they had prayed for God's blessing of many children, as all other married couples of their time did, but none came. Years passed with unanswered prayers, and Elizabeth had now reached the age where she could no longer bear a child.

But, one day, everything changed. While Zechariah was performing his priestly duties in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that his wife would have a child. Despite his doubts, Zechariah soon found out that the messenger was right. Elizabeth did conceive a child! Now, in the 6th

month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel has made a return visit to earth. Unlike his first visit, which was to a priest in Judah who was performing official religious duties, on his second visit, the angel visits a young woman who is in a small town in Galilee called Nazareth.

Though the two visits were to two different individuals in two different locations and contexts, when you examine them closely together, you can find several similarities between the two stories:

1. Both characters are filled with fear when the angel appeared to them. According to the Message translation, Zechariah was paralyzed in fear, and Mary was thoroughly shaken.
2. So, the angel Gabriel gives them both the same words of assurance - "Do not be afraid."
3. The "good news" he delivers to Zechariah and Mary are very similar. Basically, it is the same message -- the announcement of a miraculous birth.
4. Both Zechariah and Mary are given the name of their future child -- Elizabeth's son is to be called *John*, and Mary's son, *Jesus*.
5. And about their sons, the angel says the same thing - "He will be great."
6. Both pregnancies which Gabriel foretells of are miraculous - one comes to an old, barren woman and the other to a young virgin. So, the work of the Holy Spirit is involved in both stories.
7. Both Zechariah and Mary respond to Gabriel with a question.
8. Eventually, both Zechariah and Mary respond to the angel's visit with praise to God - Zechariah's song is commonly called "the Canticle" and Mary's song "the Magnificat"

Now, despite these many similarities, the two stories also reveal fundamental differences between the two characters in their response to the angel's visit. According to the Common English Bible, Zechariah responds to Gabriel by saying, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." Meanwhile, Mary asks, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

Both responses appear to be similar, but they are in fact quite different. Zechariah's question is How will I know this? or, How can I be certain? But, Mary's question does not focus on how she will know but on how this mysterious birth will come about. Her question originates not from a place of doubt or disbelief, but from her desire to better understand.

And, this difference becomes clear to us through the two very different answers the angel Gabriel gives in response to Zechariah and Mary's questions. Gabriel says to Zechariah, "Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But, because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

Zechariah was a priest. Both he and his wife were described to be righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. Without a doubt, Zechariah would have known the story of Abraham and Sarah, another elderly couple who were without a child. He knew how they were blessed with a son even when they were supposed to be too old to have children. So, the angel's message should have been exciting news because the very same thing was about to happen to him and his wife. A faithful response would have been, "If it happened to Abraham and Sarah, why not to me and my Elizabeth?"

But, Zechariah was filled with doubt and did not believe God's messenger. The angel gave him not only the name of his future son but also quite a lot of information about him - what kind of person he would become and what sort of mission from God he would carry out. It would be through his son that the people of Israel would turn back to God. Not only would he and his wife be filled with joy, the whole nation would rejoice! But, he did not hear this good news. He just could not imagine how he and his wife would conceive after so many barren years. As a consequence, he is rendered mute for the whole time of his wife's pregnancy!

Now, let's see how different the angel Gabriel's answer is to Mary's question. He says to her, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled unable to conceive is now 6 months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God." Hearing this, Mary says, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

Though he did not believe, the angel's message to Zechariah was really great news -- he and his wife would finally conceive! It was God's long-awaited answer to their prayers. It was news that he and his wife could have shared with anyone, news that would have attracted everyone's blessing. But, for Mary, the angel's message was terrible, horrible, no good, very bad news -- like the title of a children's book. It was turning her whole world upside down. It was forcing her to give up her own plans and dreams. It was threatening to end her engagement to her fiancé, Joseph, and receive condemnation from her neighbors -- leaving her in disgrace. Even in the face of such a fearful situation full of unknowns, she was able to be at peace and say, "Yes." Unlike Zechariah, Mary believed. Even though she did not fully understand the nature of her upcoming pregnancy, even though she did not see the whole picture, she still believed the angel's words: "Nothing is impossible with God." Later, Elizabeth said about Mary, "... Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

It's amazing to see the faith and trust Mary showed in contrast to Zechariah's doubt and unbelief, is it not? Zechariah's unbelief resulted in his inability to speak. But, Mary's faith and belief that nothing was impossible for God made her boldly say yes to the impossible task before her. Thus, she became the mother of Jesus, making the story of God's salvation through Jesus Christ possible.

We may not understand everything in the Bible perfectly. We may not understand everything that is happening in the world around us. Our lives may be full of uncertainty, causing us much fear and anxiety. As the account of both Zechariah and Mary show us, it is OK and natural to be fearful. To those of us in fear, the message from God is, "Do not be afraid."

Mother Mary shows us how we can keep our voices, escaping the paralysis caused by the fear over the uncertainty that surrounds our lives. We present ourselves before God, saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We surrender our false sense of control to the One who truly has control over our lives, trusting that truly nothing is impossible for God.

When God's angels appear before us, may we, like Mary, be found responding in faith -- believing not because we can see clearly or can explain everything we see with certain conviction. Instead, may we

believe despite our questions, despite our fears, relying on God's word which echoes throughout this season of waiting -- Do not be afraid.

