



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 3

The annunciation of Jesus' birth to a small-town girl tells us much about God's desires for the world.

The Favored One

Halfway through Advent we meet the woman God has chosen to bear the Messiah. Mary will be the central figure in this and the next session. This is sure to be a lot of attention on this young woman for Protestants, but perhaps it's about time. On the whole, Protestants have ignored Mary, except for dressing her in blue for the Christmas pageant. We have shied away from paying any special attention to her, turning aside from statues depicting her and avoiding praying to her. After all, this was one way to differentiate between Protestants and Catholics. We don't do Mary. However, in recent years Protestant scholars have encouraged us to take a closer look at this astonishing young woman. Two such scholars state that "The absence of Mary not only cuts Protestants off from Catholic and Orthodox Christians; it cuts us off from the fullness of our own tradition. We have neither blessed Mary nor allowed her to bless us."¹ Over these two sessions, that loss to Protestants will be addressed.

The Annunciations of Two Births

In the previous session John the Baptist was introduced, with a short nod to the annunciation of his birth to Zechariah. The story following it is the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary. These annunciation stories are found only in the Gospel of Luke. Although we usually read them as individual stories, they, along with the rest of chapters 1 and 2, form a whole. Read Luke 1:5–38, without pausing between the two accounts. Notice



We know very little about Mary; not even her parents' names are recorded in the Bible.

how the two annunciations share a common structure as well:

Each begins by setting the story in a historical moment.

Gabriel breaks in on the scene without notice or fanfare.

Zechariah and Mary are assured by Gabriel's words, "Do not be afraid."

The annunciation of the birth is proclaimed.

Each responds with a question.

Gabriel concludes the conversation.

Even with this common structure and theme of announcing a special birth, a host of differences separate the events (see the chart "Comparing the Annunciations of Two Births"). Luke takes care to give a historical note at the beginning of the annunciation of John's birth. Yet when the writer turns to the annunciation of Jesus' birth, the historical marker is Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy. We are told of the families of Zechariah and Elizabeth, which place them in the order of priests established generations ago, but we know nothing about Mary; not even her parents' names are recorded

in the Bible, although tradition identifies them as Anne and Joachim. Gabriel comes to Zechariah (the father-to-be) in the temple in Jerusalem, a holy place; the angel comes to Mary (the mother-to-be) at home in a town of no special prominence.

Gabriel's message for Zechariah is about a son who will carry on the tradition of prophets like Elijah, preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah. As we discovered in the previous session, his son John will be the fore-runner. The message for Mary is that the child she will bear *is* the Messiah, the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). The question that each asks upon hearing Gabriel's announcement further marks the difference in the stories. Zechariah, a priest, asks, "How will I know that this is so?" (Luke 1:18). His question suggests unbelief and is a request for a sign. Now to be fair to Zechariah, it doesn't seem like such an outrageous question. After all, his wife is beyond childbearing years and they probably gave up any hope of a family long ago. However, Gabriel sentences John to silence until John is born. In Luke 1:34 Mary too has a question for Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (or "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"). Mary's question is interpreted as one of belief and, perhaps, some puzzlement. When Zechariah asks for a sign, he is not given one; but when Mary does not ask for a sign, she is given one and told that aged and previously barren Elizabeth is now with child.

When the stories are read as one, we see how they neatly fit together as a continuous narrative. It is also clearer that the message Gabriel brings to each person is connected through God's grace and blessing. The response of Gabriel to their questions (the silencing of John and the words to Mary "For nothing will be impossible with God") points us once more to the sovereignty of God. It might also be noted that Gabriel's greeting to Mary in verse 28 is more than a casual "hello" or something akin to passing the peace at Sunday morning worship. "The Lord is with you" lets her know right from the start that she has been chosen by God. Zechariah gets no such warning.

Mary, the Favored One

Just who is this Mary in the out-of-the-way village of Nazareth? To begin with, she was probably about twelve years old, the common betrothal age for a girl at the time. (This information stops the sixth-graders in my church school class cold as they realize she wasn't

COMPARING THE ANNUNCIATIONS OF TWO BIRTHS

John	Jesus
To a man, Zechariah	To a woman, Mary
In the days of King Herod of Judea	In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy
John and Elizabeth of priestly families	No word of Mary's parentage
Child will prepare the people	Child is Son of the Most High
Takes place in temple	Takes place at home
Puts John in line with Elijah	Puts Jesus in the line of David
To an older, barren couple	To a young woman, betrothed
In Jerusalem, the royal city	In Nazareth, a town of no import

much older than they are.) According to Jewish custom, the man and woman would be betrothed, but not married until she moved into his home. Thus, Mary was rightly concerned about how it would be that she could be pregnant for she had not yet known a man or lived with Joseph, to whom she was betrothed. Not to mention that the punishment for adultery was severe.

We assume that her family lineage is of no consequence or Luke would have recorded it as was done for Joseph, being of the house of David, in the birth narrative (2:4). So Mary is young and betrothed. But what else might we discern from the way Mary conducts herself in this meeting with an angel, a messenger from God? Surely her mother had not prepared her for such an occasion.

Looking just at this brief passage, we find that Mary is favored because God is with her (v. 28). This is reinforced by Elizabeth, as we will see in the next session. She is thoughtful: she ponders Gabriel's greeting without responding to it (v. 29). After she takes in this astonishing message, Mary is obedient (v. 38). Favored of God, thoughtful, obedient. Jan L. Richardson comments that "Often persons have interpreted Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's invitation as unquestioning obedience and humility. Often they lift up Mary as a model of passivity



Mary is favored of God, thoughtful, obedient, but not passive. She actively questioned Gabriel.

for all women. Yet when we listen closely, we can hear the voice of a strong, active woman—a woman who dared to question Gabriel, a woman whom Gabriel did not leave until she had spoken her words of acceptance.”²

So let’s look more closely at Mary’s response to this strange turn of events. Many artists have illustrated the meeting of Gabriel and Mary. One of the most arresting is *Annunciation* by Henry Osawa Tanner. This large painting takes your breath away by its size, but even in a smaller reproduction one is drawn to Mary, seated on a bed looking uncertain perhaps, but clearly not frightened at the bright light representing Gabriel. She is not cowering in the corner, but, with hands folded in her lap, is looking directly at the light. A more playful illustration of this moment is found in the children’s book *The Nativity* illustrated by Julie Vivas with excerpts from the King James Version of the Bible. Gabriel, with his spiky red hair, work boots, tattered green robe, and gigantic tie-dyed pastel wings, approaches Mary outdoors as she is hanging clothes on a clothesline. Turn the page and they are seated indoors for a cup of tea. We might expect Gabriel to be talking seriously to Mary, but the illustration shows Mary speaking and Gabriel listening ever so intently. Two different artistic approaches, and there are many more, but in neither does Mary appear to be unquestioningly obedient. These two artists did not envision a passive image from Luke’s account.

Mary’s response, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” is often the reason for assigning the trait of humble obedience to her. Her words have also been a rationale for describing the appropriate, even ideal, response by women to God’s call. When this response is used to make Mary into the ideal, especially the ideal woman, we lose sight of the value of this story for all Christians. As Nancy Duff writes, “Scripture describes Mary, like all those called to

be prophets or disciples, as a human being with a unique calling and exemplary faithfulness in obedience, not as an image of perfection. We are called in this world to real tasks, not ideal ones. When Mary is understood as the perfect model, we who are not perfect are doomed to endless striving toward that which we cannot achieve.”³ The biblical image of Mary can be a model of faithfulness for anyone, male or female, young or old.

Joel Green would have us think of Mary as “accessible exemplar.” Through her, we are encouraged to see beyond the world we know, that we take for granted, and to search for new and fresh approaches to making sense of our lives and our relatedness to God and one another.⁴ To help us in this search for how to approach Mary, how to bless her and allow her to bless us, we probably need to be certain about why Mary is the Blessed One. Nothing about Mary, not her family, her piety, or her station in life is the reason for Gabriel’s visit to her. She is blessed because she has answered God’s call, and God’s call results not from what we have already done.

When we recognize that Mary was not extraordinary in any way, then we too can see in her a model for our faith, male or female. When we observe that Mary had no time to prepare for this visit from Gabriel, we too can recognize that God’s call can come to us in the most ordinary of moments. When we spend more time on pondering Mary’s virginity and less on God coming into this world, we lose the power of God’s grace among us in this astonishing event. So let us bless Mary for who she was and how she answered her call from God. Let us allow her example of faithfulness to bless us and show us the way to God’s grace and love.

Advent and Mary, Favored One

If Advent is a time of waiting, how do we wait with Mary through her nine months of pregnancy? Perhaps

A friend who had spent a sabbatical working with refugees in Southeast Asia once sent me a homemade Christmas card that put the more colorful cards to shame; it consisted of a black-and-white snapshot of a Cambodian mother holding her infant in her arms. What struck me most was the youth of the mother and the fact that this unposed photograph was instantly recognizable as a madonna and child: the mother beholding the child in love and wonder.⁵

we take a clue from her thoughtful approach to this surprise visit from Gabriel. We ponder the word of God as we ponder the world around us. We take note of all that we see and we listen intently as well.

As we light the third candle of the Advent wreath, the candle of joy, we can surely continue in this season joyfully, as we wait and continue to move toward the arrival of the One sent from God.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.
2. Jan L. Richardson, *Sacred Journeys* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1995), 23.
3. Nancy J. Duff, "Mary, the Servant of the Lord," in Gaventa and Rigby, 66.
4. Joel B. Green, "Blessed Is She Who Believed," in Gaventa and Rigby, 10.
5. Kathleen Norris, "Foreword," in Gaventa and Rigby, ix.