

Title: The Mary Miracle: A close encounter of the extraordinary kind.

Subtitle: The secrets of submitting to God's daily visitations

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/fAhC9dpvPj4>

Our Gospel today features the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel to a virgin named Mary. In it, we see the most extraordinary announcement ever sent from heaven to a mortal creature. First, he says to Mary, ***“Hail,”***¹ a greeting that means more than just “be well,” but “rejoice and be cheerful,” for ***“you are highly favored. The Lord is with you!”***² At first, Mary is perplexed and acutely distressed at his announcement. But from the angel's perspective, it was meant for comfort and joy.

Greetings have a way of expressing care, concern, and interest in another's well-being. Our Advent and Christmas season is a time for sending and receiving greetings. Lists are found from last year, dusted off, amended, and updated; cards are bought and prepared; notes are written, chronicling the past year's events. Then, in return, greetings are exchanged through cards that come in the mail and email.

The greetings to the Virgin Mary were not just wishes for her well-being. The child to be born would be the Savior of the World. His arrival would ***“bring good news of great joy for all the people.”***³

This Advent season is a time of waiting in expectation for that good news to be fully realized, even though our present circumstances may seem to make it highly unlikely.

As many of you know, Mary was from ***“a town in Galilee called Nazareth.”***⁴ The region was known as ***“Galilee of the Gentile***

¹ Strong's concordance, #5463 chairó (khah'-ee-ro): **Definition:** to rejoice, be glad: also a salutation: Hail.

² Luke 1:28

³ Luke 2:10

⁴ Luke 1:26

Nations,”⁵ where foreign trades, cultures, and religions mixed. Modern archaeologists recently discovered an ancient Roman garrison there. Isaiah described the region as **“a land of deep darkness,”**⁶ far from a place conducive to good news. Consequently, orthodox Jews despised it. Even a well-respected Jew named Nathaniel, who Jesus said had no guile, asked, **“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”**⁷ So here we have an ordinary young girl from a lowly town who finds herself suddenly surprised and addressed by an angel. **“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”**⁸ Mary can hardly believe what she is hearing. Could it really be that an ordinary girl like her could find herself in such a “highly favored” position?

Anyone from such a humble background would be bewildered when addressed in such an exalted manner. I felt a similar sense of unbelief when God revealed that there was a call on my life. At the time, I had a speech impediment that made speaking in front of people seem as impossible as telling a mountain to move. When I told my dad there was a call of God on my life, in total unbelief, he asked, “What are you going to do about speaking?” I responded, “Dad, that is God’s problem.” Admittedly, Mary’s challenges were much greater than mine.

Mary wouldn’t have been human if she wasn’t perplexed by the announcement, **“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”**⁹ But with all the questions exploding in her mind, she has the guts to put into words the most

⁵ Isaiah 9:1

⁶ Isaiah 9:2

⁷ John 1:46

⁸ Luke 1:28

⁹ Luke 1:31-32

fundamental question of them all, ***“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”***¹⁰

As I consider her down-to-earth honesty, I cannot help but appreciate the Anglican view of Mary that does not deify her. She is a flesh and blood human being who had something extraordinarily unique happen to her. Yet, looking closely at her life, we can find much she has in common with us. Mary is not someone out of our league, as if she was without sin. And neither is she without overwhelming challenges as she responds to the implications of the call she received. Her age, inexperience, marital status, and powerlessness are all issues with which we can relate.

Moreover, we all face challenges of faith whenever the ordinary is invaded by the extraordinary. But let us not forget that God’s favor is extended towards us, too, as we face our own challenges of obedience and faith.

In Christ, God is with us, just as He was with Mary. We are waiting to give birth to something, too. The Apostle Paul, who understood our part in bringing the good news to an unbelieving world, wrote, ***“My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.”***¹¹ Our opening collect prayer suggests a similar encounter of the extraordinary kind when, through our daily encounters with the Holy Spirit, God plans to make us a mansion prepared for himself.

God comes to us in various ways, but each encounter forms something new. For some, his visitations bring a window of insight and vision. At other times, it is a wall for moral boundaries. At other times, it provides cleansing and new understanding.

Hearing God’s word in new and fresh ways takes quiet, attentive listening. Sometimes, it takes a mentor or spiritual director to come

¹⁰ Luke 1:34

¹¹ Galatians 4:19

alongside us and gently point out things we may have taken for granted. Then, through pondering, asking questions, and careful listening, hopefully, we will come to the point of surrender, as Mary did when she humbly accepted her call and responded, ***“Behold, I am the Lord’s servant. May it be done to me according to your word.”***¹²

Mary was willing to be obedient, even though she faced enormous obstacles. And she accepted this honor even if it meant the sacrifice of something dearer to a young maiden in her culture than her very life, namely, her reputation as a virgin. Moreover, she was even willing to face the possibility of losing the love of her life, Joseph. But let’s remember; there was more going for her than what was against her. Her courage was based on what God could do in light of

- His favor
- His presence, and
- His promises, which far outweighed all the apparent negatives. Consequently, her weakness is lifted and turned into strength by a God for whom nothing is impossible.

Therefore, our Advent hope turns our eyes toward God’s great and precious promises, inspiring that same blessed spirit of faith we see in the Virgin Mary. May we be like her, who ***“treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart,”***¹³ causing her to lift up her voice in humble adoration. Let us be willing to go anywhere, do anything, and be anything, whatever the present and immediate inconvenience, so long as God’s will is clear and the path of duty confirmed. Our life is one of faith from first to last, but that life has to be received and nurtured. Then we might find, like Mary, that our hearts can be ***“...a mansion prepared for himself.”***¹⁴ Amen.

¹² Luke 1:38

¹³ Luke 2:19

¹⁴ Quote taken from the collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent 4, BCP, page 212