

***The Gift of Mary:
God's Never Done It That Way Before***

We are always making assumptions. Sometimes they help us understand things more clearly. Other times they prevent us from seeing things the way they really are.

For instance, if it were time for the coming of the Messiah—the long-awaited King of Israel who would lead his nation to freedom, and establish his people as the envy of the world—it was assumed he would have to be born into royalty and power.

We've had 2,000 years now to get **that** notion out of our heads.

Now we make the opposite assumption.

Take Mary—fiancé of Joseph the carpenter of Nazareth, future Mother of Jesus the Christ. We've gotten used to the fact that she is not, as pastor Lori would say, a Disney Princess or the secret, adopted daughter of a magnificent Eastern Potentate. Here's the commonly understood assumption Christians make about Mary today from author Daniel Darling:

“Gabriel didn't choose to make this announcement to Herod's daughter or a member of elite Jewish society but to a poor, illiterate, unimportant Jewish girl in Nazareth named Mary...She was, like every other Jewish peasant girl in Nazareth, simply living out an ordinary life in an ordinary town with unassuming dreams. [He goes on to quote a certain Kent Hughes who] describes Mary's likely future this way:

‘From all indicators, her life would not be extraordinary. She would marry humbly, give birth to numerous poor children, never travel farther than a few miles from home, and one day die like thousands of others before her—a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.’”

Who says? Doesn't even that assume a bit too much?

Would it change the story one iota if we tweaked a few details so that Mary's family that was doing fine—or better than fine--by village standards. No reason not to think that she didn't have brothers who would have helped raise the standard of living or maybe worked with their Father at a successful family business. Maybe it was no mistake Mary was arranged to be married a carpenter. Maybe it was a merger of two local businessmen that made both stronger and more prosperous as a result.

Who is to say that Joseph wasn't a real catch—tall, good looking, the silent & sweet type. A young man with real prospects of supporting a large family.

Why couldn't Mary have been Valedictorian of The Nazareth Torah School for Girls? She could easily have been as bright as any boy—able to recite the Torah forward and backward--but of course, forced to hide it lest it become known among the men of the community. She could have been voted Most popular, or President of the Home Economics Club two years running, a selfless volunteer in the synagogue nursery who was great with kids.

Mary might have been one of those older girls that no one ever had a harsh word about. Mary was the one all the other Mothers in town would point to and say to their daughters, “Why can’t you be more like Mary?”

Would these details change what we think of her? Of course not. They are just different details. They don’t affect the outcome at all.

But as I was digging into Mary’s story I noticed something that might actually change an assumption or two.

I don’t hear an ask from the Angel Gabriel. What I mean is that I don’t hear him ask Mary if she is willing to be part of this amazing plan God is unfolding. He tells her what will happen or what is happening, but I don’t hear a single interrogatory sentence—not a single question mark in his whole spiel. He doesn’t ask if she’d like to become the Blessed Virgin Mother. He tells her what God is going to do through her. Period.

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

You **will** conceive and give birth to a son, and you **are to** call him Jesus.

He **will be** great and **will be** called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God **will give** him the throne of his father David,

and **he will** reign over Jacob’s descendants forever;

his kingdom **will never end**

None of Mary’s responses, by the way, surprise me.

²⁸The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled [very startled; disturbed; agitated; perplexed] at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

She’s one step away from running from the room over the strange greeting she gets from God’s angel. There are so many ways to understand why. But I’m thinking that this bright young girl knows a snow job when she feels the first flakes hitting her face. Gabriel is intimidating enough but then to address her as someone honored by God can only mean one thing—there’s real work to be done and it isn’t going to be easy and it isn’t going to be pretty. She may also suspect that Gabriel is being so gracious because he has already asked all the really qualified maidens and has worked all the way down to the ‘M’s.

No, I’m kidding.

Mary’s a faithful daughter of Moses and it doesn’t take long for her to figure out that **what this angel is proposing is something God never does.** God doesn’t work this way—at least God never has. This is 100% unprecedented, hence it’s unbiblical—meaning you won’t find anything like it anywhere in the holy scriptures. It’s theologically messy. How can God be God but also be a baby? And if she says ‘Yes’ it’s going to put her in the position of breaking about a dozen important religious commandments that God himself has put in place.

Sure, Mary finally gets to “**You’re God and You will do what you think best, and even though I don’t understand this yet, and even though I’m not really sure I have a say so in**

all this, let it be as you have said.” But I’m not sure that there is any opt out clause for Mary. It’s just assumed she’ll do what she’s asked when she’s asked by an Archangel.

There is much to admire about Mary as a person of faith, as a model of motherhood, as an example of perseverance through heartache and suffering. But this advent, I’m going to ask you to put all that aside. **Because this passage isn’t about Mary as much as it is about God.**

This isn’t about Mary’s faithfulness
or Mary’s availability
or Mary’s future role as a future disciple of
her own son.

This is a miracle story.

And from the very start this particular miracle was cloaked in scandal. Not so much because it plays fast and loose with reproductive science, but because the Jews of Mary’s day simply believed this is not how God works. At the very least—**God’s never done it this way before.** God uses human beings, yes. God doesn’t go around creating human beings from whole cloth—not since the creation of the world. That’s what the religious leaders would have said at the time. That’s how the local rabbi would have responded if Mary would have sought out his counsel. And yet here was a miracle—wrought by God—whether they could see it or not.

This miracle is about how God won’t let anything keep him from healing the brokenness of his people and rescuing his children trapped in their captivity to sin and shame.

- God will do whatever it takes—whether it has ever been done before or not.
- God will break all the rules even those He laid down himself.
- If God has a plan and purpose to redeem his world then God will accomplish that plan without feeling the need to make it fit into our comfortable assumptions.

Anytime you’re tempted to say, “But God’s Never Done it that way Before.” Think of Mary and the word of the living God which became a vulnerable embryo inside her womb, and try to imagine how foreign and incomprehensible such a concept would have been—and still is today for a great many people.

That, my sisters and brothers, is Mary’s gift to us this Christmas. To be able to understand that God is capable of doing a new thing, outside the box—outside any and every box we have built to honor or contain him. God will do miracles in any way that pleases him and our job, like Mary, is to be quiet, to listen, and to play whatever part we called upon to play.

I get frustrated that a lot of people can’t tell the difference between News and Opinion. Most folks don’t pay close enough attention when cable networks switch from one to the other. They get left with the impression that someone’s opinion is news or that news is the result of someone’s opinion. As the former President of *Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists*, (the DePauw chapter), it breaks my heart how often the boundary between these two categories gets crossed.

News is a report about what has happened. **Opinion** is how you should think about what has happened, and what you ought to go out and do about it. Tim Keller uses slightly different labels. He calls them **advice** and **news**. Here's how he describes the difference.

Advice is counsel about what you must do.

News is a report about what has already been done.

Advice urges you to make something happen.

News urges you to recognize something that has already happened and leaves you free to respond to it.

Advice says it is all up to you to act.

News says someone else has acted.

His point, and mine this morning, is that at the heart of this beautiful moment is a maiden from Nazareth who converses with an Archangel of God, only to find out that, through her, redemption will come to all of God's people. God is doing a new thing in an unprecedented way by the power of his word and Spirit. Again, let me quote Pastor Keller from his book, *Hidden Christmas*.

"The shepherds, the parents of Jesus, the wise men—are not being held up primarily as examples for us. These Gospel narratives are telling you **not what you should do but what God has done**. The birth of the Son of God into the world is a gospel, good news, an announcement. ***You don't save yourself. God has come to save you.***"

God had never done anything like this before. But now God has. **God has become one of us in order to save all of us.** Sisters and brothers, that news is very good news indeed.