

Mary Looks Back
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I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had said “no.”

I know you’ve heard the stories of how the angel Gabriel came to me—
oh, thirty years ago now—
with his famous pronouncement.

You didn’t get the whole story, of course;
the simplified version is what always gets retold,
the simplified, sanitized version that leaves out all the details.
For example, did you know that when Gabriel appeared, I was doing the laundry?
In fact, I was looking down, scrubbing stains, when I heard his voice:
“Greetings, favored one! God is with you!”

I know you’ve heard that I was
“perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”
Perplexed? That is such a polite way of wording it.
Confused. Bewildered. Baffled. Utterly bamboozled.
All of those might fit better than “perplexed.”
I mean, I was just a girl . . . doing laundry.
Nobody expects to meet an angel while doing laundry.

Then Gabriel proceeded with his outrageous news:
that I had found favor with God
and that I would conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus.
Gabriel said, “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.”

Now, I knew what that meant.
Basically, the angel had just told me that I would give birth to the Messiah.
The Messiah! The one our people have been praying for and waiting on
for hundreds and hundreds of years.
The one who would rescue us from Roman occupation!
The Galilee region where I am from is rife with political violence, rebellion,

military oppression.

Weapons are all around us; violence is rampant.

We need a messiah.

We need a Messiah, who would put an end to our oppression!

The one who would bring an end to the daily violence
in which we live.

So I'm told I will give birth to the Messiah, and what's the first question I asked?

"How can this be, since I'm—you know—not married?"

Leave it to a teenage girl to miss the grand scheme of things
because of being a bit self-absorbed!

Well, Gabriel humored me and tried to explain how it would happen . . .
in words that made no sense to anyone then or now.

I've had many people ask me, even in recent years,

(as if it was any of their business)

if I was really—you know—or if maybe Joseph and I hadn't...

And I will tell you the truth:

Those questions totally miss the point.

The point wasn't biology or anatomy or who did what to whom.

The point was that God came to me, a peasant girl,

while I was doing laundry

and announced the miraculous

and then gave me a choice to participate.

In my world a peasant girl is seldom given choices . . .

not over what she wears or what she eats,

and not over who she marries

and certainly not over whether she will bear a child.

And yet . . . I was given a choice.

You may not have heard that part of the story—

in its simplified, sanitized, male-i-fied way—but it is there.

Then Gabriel told me that my cousin Elizabeth in her old age

had also conceived a son

"for nothing will be impossible with God."

That's when I started asking questions that weren't recorded,

but I had so many questions.

I asked how I was supposed to know how to raise any child,
much less the one who would become the Messiah.

I asked if it would hurt — giving birth to the Messiah,
if there was maybe some special perk to take away
the pain of childbirth!

I asked if it would hurt — watching him grow, grow up, grow away.

I asked if I would see him do miraculous things,
if his people would welcome him as their Messiah.

Gabriel didn't answer all my questions.

He said he couldn't.

I don't know if he didn't know
or if he couldn't tell me.

But I learned enough to know that our path—mine and my son's—
would not be easy,
that my heart would be broken,
my soul pierced.

But that is the way of motherhood—fatherhood too I imagine.

Love brings pain.

But I'd rather know the pain of loving
than the pain of choosing not to love.

I was ready to agree but I had one more question:

“Couldn't you ask the rabbi's daughter?
She's so much more religious than I am!”

Gabriel didn't really answer, just repeated what he'd already said.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

I took that to mean that maybe God wasn't looking for religious.

Maybe God was just looking for somebody who would say “yes.”

And so I did. I gave consent. “Here I am, the servant of God;
let it be with me according to your word.”

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had said “no.”

I have no doubt that Jesus still would have been born.

God would have found some other girl who was braver than me.

The world would not have missed the miracle, but I would have.

I would have missed the miracle of watching him grow
 from a thoughtful boy into the man he was meant to be.
I would have missed watching him leave home
 to begin his public ministry.
I would have missed watching him turn water to wine.
I would have missed the miracles, the healings, the teachings.
Some people believe and are following him now because they saw the miracles.
But I believed when the angel stood before me,
 calling me blessed and favored,
 and gave me a choice to participate in the miracle.

I don't know if you'll ever get a divine visit while you're doing laundry.
 Maybe it's only we clueless ones who need visits from angels
 to get us to say "yes!"
But I think—I think you've already been asked to do amazing things.
 I think we all get asked . . .
 to give birth to hope
 to bring joy to life,
 to bring good news to the oppressed,
 to raise up the lowly and bring the powerful from their thrones,
 to resist violence and weapons of war.
We all get asked
 to change the world.
So when you get asked, say "yes!"
Say "yes!" so that the miracle can be born in you.

"Greetings, favored one! God is with you!"