

5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, who were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia played an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room proclaiming to all who could hear him, "I'm a sheep." Then asking, "What are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Claire, who was still struggling into her costume with her mother's help. He repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?"

Claire simply said, "I'm Mary."

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, the boy felt he needed to justify his own role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part.

Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know." (1)

Well, yes, it's hard being a virgin. Let me hasten to say it's even harder being a teen-aged mom. Scholars tell us that, according to the customs of that land, Mary may have been 13 or 14 years of age when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and made the announcement that would change her life forever. Gabriel said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

What an amazing experience! Do you remember when you were Mary's age? I love the way Pastor John Nadası deals with Mary's situation. He envisions Mary as being fifteen.

"Fifteen," he writes. "It's an awkward time. Your body is somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Hormones are doing all sorts of weird things to your body . . . And there is this great race to grow up. Still, at fifteen you are not old enough to drive a car, vote, stay out late, or live on your own. At fifteen, there are a lot of things that you are not allowed to do. Now, close your eyes for a moment. Remember yourself at fifteen years old. You are in Junior High, interested in things fifteen year olds are interested in. You are still a child living in your parents' home. Then, one night, there is a disturbance in another room of your house. You get up to investigate and there, in the middle of your living room stands this beautiful, Supernatural, and absolutely terrifying angelic presence that speaks these words to you . . . 'Greetings Favored One, The Lord is With You.' What would you do? What would be going through your mind? Would you be wondering how fast you could get out the back door and down the street?" (2)

I think that would be my response to this surprise announcement by an angel. Luke tells us that Mary was thoroughly shaken by this announcement. But she does not bolt. She does not run. And Gabriel continues: "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."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

An amazing story about an amazing event in history. **An angel appears to a teen-aged girl and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God.** It is an absurd story. It is a story that challenges credulity. Even some Christians smirk when they talk about it, as if this is the only story that Mary and Joseph could come up with to explain this inconvenient pregnancy. But this is what we believe. God came to earth at Christmas. From his birth to his baptism to his death on the cross, in Jesus Christ God walked the dusty plains of this small planet and experienced what it means to be human . . . What it means to have family and friends . . . What it is to laugh and to love and to lose . . . What it is to suffer and to face death. An angel appears to a teen-aged young woman and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God.

In the play *Green Pastures*, which ran for many years on Broadway, playwright Marc Connelly has a moving and memorable scene. The Lord is anxiously looking out over the parapets of heaven, trying to decide what to do with the sinful situation on earth. Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord's dilemma, he brushes his lips across the trumpet to keep the feel of it and asks, "Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?"

"No, no," said the Lord, "don't touch the trumpet, not yet."

God continues to worry with the problem. Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. "How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?"

Without looking back at Gabriel, God said, "I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!!" (3)

And, of course, that is what God did. In Jesus Christ the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But why? What is the meaning of it all?

Years ago Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, explained the miracle of Christmas with a parable:

Once upon a time there lived a king who loved a poor maiden. This king was an all-powerful king. He could choose any maiden in his kingdom for his bride. But the maiden did not know the king or suspect his love for her. This posed a problem for the king. He knew if he approached her as the king, she would be awed by the differences between them. She might admire him for his power and status, but she could not forget that he was the king and that she was but a humble maiden. Because he truly loved her the king wanted her to love him for himself, not for his power. The king considered the possibility of somehow secretly elevating the maiden to the rank of a princess. Then they would be equals. But he quickly realized the folly of this approach. She would see through his deception. And if she did not, he feared the transformation might alter her character. And he loved her as she was.

The king grieved. How could he help his beloved to understand him as he wished to be understood, as a lover rather than a king? Finally, the way became clear. If their union could not be effected through the maiden's elevation to the king, it must be attempted through the king's descent to the maiden. The king realized he must appear in the likeness of a servant, as one humble enough to

serve her. So he clothed himself in a beggar's cloak and went out to meet the maiden. Did she accept his love? What do you think?

An angel appears to a virgin, and tells her that she will give birth to God's child. This was God's way of seeking to woo humanity. God would humble Himself and live among us so that we might come to know His true nature. God had no desire to overpower us, but to enter into a relationship with us. And so God chose this young woman, a virgin.

You are aware that some scholars have questioned the virgin birth. It is a beautiful part of the story, however, and many believers treasure it.

It reminds me of a somewhat humorous story about that champion of women's rights, Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth was a former slave who, after she was free became a fearless public speaker and tireless crusader for human rights. It is said she electrified audiences throughout this country in the 19th century.

Sojourner Truth attended a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1863. One of the women attending the convention recorded what happened at that event. While Sojourner Truth was speaking a heckler shouted out that women shouldn't have as many rights as men because Christ wasn't a woman. Raising herself to her full height of nearly six feet, Sojourner Truth answered like this, "Then that little man in back there, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ weren't a woman! Where did your Christ come from?" she asked rhetorically. "From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do with him." (4)

Sojourner Truth was right. According to Luke's Gospel, man had nothing to do with him. An angel appears to a virgin and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God. All of history was changed by Gabriel's announcement to Mary.

But it was also changed by Mary's response: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

No hesitation, no "I'll get back to you tomorrow." Mary answers, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Gabriel announces to her that she will be a mother even though she has not formally been wed to her beloved Joseph, has not even been intimate with him, and she replies, "Do with me as you will."

Writer Philip Yancey notes that, in the modern United States, each year a million teenage girls become pregnant out of wedlock. We don't think that much about it, unless of course, it is our daughter. Mary's predicament was entirely different in a closely knit Jewish community in the first century. The news that Gabriel delivered could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning. (5)

Did Mary know what she was getting herself into? Maybe not entirely. But that did not change her answer. She said "Yes" to God and the world has never since been the same.

The American Standard Version of the Bible translates Mary's answer to the angel like this: "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word."

Though it doesn't appear in more modern versions of the New Testament, this word "bondslave" is important. The scourge of slavery was common in New Testament times. Some slaves were captives taken in war. Many people were forced into slavery as a way to work off debts. But in some instances, a slave came to love his or her master and willingly choose to remain in slavery rather than go free. In those cases, the slave was declared a bondslave one who chose to serve out of love rather than obligation. This was how Mary saw her relationship to God. She would willingly give up her own agenda and submit herself to His will. (6)

No wonder God chose this humble maiden for the most important assignment anyone on earth has ever received. Suppose you loved God that much? Suppose I loved God that much? Three times in this portion of Scripture Luke uses the word "Blessed!" to describe Mary. It's a strong word in Greek, conveying God's gracious goodwill toward a person. No wonder so many people in this world revere Mary even today as "the blessed virgin." She was a young woman of courage and conviction.

I understand that the name "Mary" is still one of the most popular names for females in the U. S. I am certain that this teenage girl long ago had something to do with that.

Mary was blessed because she was obedient. Do you want a blessing from God? Here is the secret be totally obedient to God's will for your life and you will be blessed. Being blessed doesn't mean your life will be easy.

Let's use an analogy. Christmas is a blessed season, the most blessed season of the year. But it can still be a stressful time. In Philadelphia, the Old First Reformed Church, United Church of Christ, always has a Nativity scene with mannequins representing Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. But to liven up things, they use live animals. One year, the scene featured a couple of kids (baby goats). The kids were a big attraction, as they were lively and would sometimes climb up on the back of the cow and walk around. One night, however, they wrecked the Nativity scene the mannequins representing Joseph and Mary were toppled over, and some of the mannequins representing the shepherds even had their heads knocked off. The pastor of the church, Geneva M. Butz, surveyed the wreckage, then told a passerby, "Isn't this how many of us feel on Christmas morning?" (7)

Maybe we do. Christmas is a blessed season, but that doesn't mean there is not stress. Being blessed didn't mean Mary's life was easy. Far from it. Particularly thirty-three years later when she watched her son die on Calvary's tree. Those of you who have adult children isn't it your prayer that they will far outlive you? Is there any greater tragedy than to lose a child? Mary understood that pain because it happened to her. She watched her baby grow and becomes an amazing young man only to have his life snuffed out at the far too young age of thirty-three. Being blessed did not mean being trouble free. But it did mean that God was always with her. And friend, if you are obedient to God, God will always be with you.

Why are we in this place today? Because more than 2,000 years ago an angel appeared to a 13 or 14 year old girl, a virgin, in a remote part of the world, and made a most remarkable announcement 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."

And Mary answered, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

1. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/round-yon-virgin-mother-and-child-pat-cook-sermon-on-humanity-of-christ-86127.asp>.
2. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/first-mary-now-us-john-nadasi-sermon-on-salvation-53331.asp>.
3. Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, http://day1.org/1187-a_permanent_glimpse_of_god.
4. Jacqueline Bernard, *Journey Toward Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967), pp. 166-67.
5. "Cosmic Combat: The Other Side of Christmas, Part 1, *Christianity Today*, 12/12/94.
6. Richards, R. Scott, *Myths the World Taught Me* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 173.
7. Geneva M. Butz, *Christmas in All Seasons*, pp. 19-20.250 *Anecdotes about Religion: Volume 2* (David Bruce).

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