

One of the most beautiful of the modern Christmas songs was written by a man who is best known, perhaps, as a comedian. His name is Mark Lowry. Lowry is also a musician of some note. He performed for many years with the Gaither Vocal band. In 1984 he was asked to pen some words for his local church choir and he wrote a poem that began like this, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?" A few years later guitarist Buddy Greene added a perfectly matching tune and a wonderful song was born. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know when you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God!" Each of the little couplets touches the heart in a wonderful way. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation? Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?" (1) The song's been around now for nearly two decades. Listen for it on the radio. The most popular version is sung by Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd. Mary, did you know . . . ?

How could Mary know what was happening to her when the angel Gabriel came to her long ago? Only Luke tells this story. The Gospel of Luke is often called the Gospel of womanhood because Luke has so many positive stories about women. In fact, there are eight positive stories about women in Luke's gospel. Later in Luke's Gospel you will discover stories about Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and the woman who anointed Jesus' body for burial. In the book of Acts, also written by Luke, we hear another positive story about a business woman, Lydia, the maker of purple.

Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth from Mary's point of view. The angel Gabriel is the messenger of God. He has already announced to an elderly gentleman named Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, despite her old age. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Then Gabriel visits Mary. Following Gabriel's visit to her, you may remember, Mary visits Elizabeth and the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumps when they meet. You won't find these kinds of details in the other Gospels. (2)

Luke begins today's story by telling us that in the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Then Luke adds these words, "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

What does it mean to be favored by God? This is an important question. Evidently it doesn't mean that your life is going to be a bed of roses.

Listen as Luke continues, "But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

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

This is interesting. Mary is not married. She's still a virgin. And she's going to have a baby. Is this something she should get excited about? Zechariah and Elizabeth had been married for many years. For most of those years they had been praying for a child. The birth of their son John in their old age was literally an answer to prayer. I doubt that the same thing can be said for Mary. She was a teenager and she was about to become

an unwed mother. Whoopee! Mary and Joseph lived within a strict community regulated by religious laws and customs. Mary could have been stoned for being pregnant and unmarried. And imagine Joseph's hurt. She's supposed to be happy about this? God has an interesting way of showing His favor.

Years ago a psychologist named Thomas Holmes developed a scale for measuring stress. He assigned numerical values to events that cause stress such as the loss of job, moving to a new city, a new relationship. Dr. Holmes even included Christmas on his stress list. He decided that just a normal Christmas was worth a hefty 14 stress points. Some of you understand. You're up to 15 or 20 stress points right now.

A writer by the name of Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes' scale and applied it to Mary. Holmes calculated that any pregnancy earns 40 points: an unwanted pregnancy, add 20 more. A change in living conditions Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth earns 25 more. Marriage to Joseph: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38 points.

Surely there must have been words between them when she discovered that he had not made reservations at the inn: score 35 points for an argument with a spouse.

And then the birth--39 points: 16 for a change in sleeping habits; 15 for a change in eating habits. Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going and wise men from the East.

Psychologist Thomas Holmes says that people get sick when they reach 200 points on his stress scale. Ms. Kuhns calculates that Mary's ordeal earned her a record 424 points. (3) This, of course, does not even include the flight to Egypt. Or even more importantly, the experience of watching her beloved son die as a common criminal on a cross. Is this what it means to be favored of God? Evidently being favored of God does not protect you from life's bumps and bruises.

This is an important truth. It is so easy for us to say when things are going our way, "The Lord sure is blessing us." That sounds so pious, doesn't it? We are blessed. We may be in for a big surprise. It may be that one day we will be the ones who will hear the Lord say, "I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink . . ." (Matthew 25:31-46) Maybe the reason things seem to be going our way is that we are living only for ourselves. It's easy to have a merry Christmas with lots of fine presents under the tree when we insulate ourselves from the world's problems.

Rather than blessing us, God may actually despise our opulent self-indulgence.

Conversely, if we are going through a difficult time in our life right now when we feel like we can barely hold on, God may be very close to us. The angel Gabriel, in saying that Mary was blessed by God, was not saying that God would make her way easy. What he was saying was that Mary would be used of God, and in the long run of life, this is what being blessed means. How about you? Can you say that right now you are being used by God for a purpose? Be careful whom you call favored by God.

Gabriel told Mary that she was favored by God and that she would bear a son. And Mary asked a sensible question: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Good question.

Here is how the angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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 barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Underline that last sentence: **Nothing is impossible with God.** I have often wondered, is it anymore difficult to believe that God gave Mary a virgin birth than it is to believe that Abraham and Sarah and Zechariah and Elizabeth bore children at an advanced age? Certainly Mary in her shame could have lied about the visit of an angel, but there was no way that Elizabeth, who was far beyond child bearing years could make up a story about her pregnancy. It was a miracle! If Elizabeth were much younger than Zechariah, there could be another explanation, but that was not the case. It was a miracle. And Jesus' birth was a miracle. If scientists were to announce tomorrow that a virgin birth had been created in the laboratory, not a one of us would dispute it. Science can do such amazing things nowadays. But we want to deny the God who created science the ability to manipulate the laws of the universe and to give a baby a unique birth. That's absurd. Jesus' birth was a miracle. Underline it again. **Nothing is impossible with God.** Remember that the next time you are in a hard place. **Nothing is impossible with God.** Now there are many theologians and Bible scholars who have real difficulty with the notion of a virgin birth. For one thing, Isaiah didn't really prophesy that a virgin will conceive and bear a son. A better translation is simply that a "young woman" will conceive and bear a son. That's all right. It really doesn't matter to most of us how God sent Christ into the world, only that He did.

New Testament scholar Fred Craddock tells of being in Bethlehem and hearing a Jewish man explain the Christmas story. They were standing in Shepherd's Field, a field where the shepherds might have heard the angels' song. On a clear night if you stand down there and look toward the city, explained the Jewish man, there is a bright star, and it looks like it's standing right over the houses. And that, he said, is what happened at Christmas. Of course, Craddock's new friend was confusing the shepherd's story with that of the wise men, but Craddock didn't try to correct him. The Jewish man went on to explain that this is how people got confused and thought there was a star over the house where Jesus was. When he finished, Craddock said, "Well that's one way to look at it."

Then the Jewish man said something very interesting. He said, "I know that's just one way to look at it. When I was in school," he continued, "the rabbi explained everything in the Bible two different ways. When he would come to a miracle, he would explain it two different ways, and his reason was this: If something happens and you can't explain it another way, then God didn't do it." (4)

Think about that for a moment. If you can't explain it a second way, God didn't do it. God always gives us a second way to look at anything that happens. God never overpowers us with certainty. Everything we know about God is seen "through a glass darkly." That is what faith is. It is never certainty. It's faith. There can always be another explanation. This is so we can still be free to say yes to God or to say no. If you have difficulty with the idea of miracles, then God does not hold that against you. Many fine Christians don't believe in the virgin birth. All we're saying today is, when it comes to God, be careful what you say is impossible.

Be careful whom you call blessed. Be careful what you say is impossible. **And finally, be thankful that this young woman said yes to God.** You see, Mary was free to say no to God just as we are. God never forces Himself on anyone. But when the angel Gabriel gave Mary the news that she would bear God's son, here is how Mary replied. "I

am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Mary became the mother of the Savior because she was obedient to God.

Obedience is not a fashionable word in our modern world, is it? An older gentleman was commenting to his wife that couples don't use the word "obey" in marriage ceremonies anymore.

"Too bad, isn't it?" he added, "It used to lend a little humor to the occasion."

Obedience isn't in fashion in a do-your-own-thing society. Yet obedience is an important part of the Christian life. There are some things that people would never force themselves to do except in obedience to God.

Chuck Colson was in Raleigh, North Carolina on Christmas Eve 1985. He was there to speak in several nearby prisons. He turned on CNN to catch the late news. On the screen was Mother Teresa. She had her arms around two emaciated young men. They were in the last stages of AIDS and had been released from prison to enter a home established by Mother Teresa's order.

When a reporter demanded to know "why we should care about criminals with AIDS," Mother Teresa explained that these young men had been created in God's image and deserved to know of God's love.

Colson saw all this taking place and wondered, "How could she do it? Embrace those men who were dying of that deadly virus?" Colson knew he could never have that kind of courage.

The next morning Colson preached to several hundred women prisoners. As he was getting ready to leave, the warden asked if he would visit Bessie Shipp, an AIDS patient in an isolation cell. "It's Christmas," explained the warden, "and nobody has visited her." Now, in Colson's defense, in 1985 we didn't have as much information about how AIDS spreads as we do today. So we can understand why he began to make excuses. But then, in his mind's eye, Chuck Colson saw the love-filled face of Mother Teresa and he heard her words: *These boys deserve to know of God's love . . .* And so, Colson found himself saying to the warden, "Well, all right, take me to Bessie Shipp."

When they arrived at the isolation cell Colson discovered a petite young woman bundled up in a bathrobe, reading a Bible. They chatted for a few moments, and since there wasn't much time, he got to the point. "Bessie, do you know Jesus?" he asked. "No," she said. "I try to. I read this book. I want to know Him, but I haven't been able to find Him." And Colson took one of Bessie's hands while the chaplain took the other, and together they led Bessie in prayer. When they finished, she looked at them with tears flowing down her cheeks. It was a life-changing moment, says Colson, for Bessie and for him. Three weeks later Bessie Shipp, a new person in Christ Jesus, went to be with God. Colson says he shudders when he thinks how close he had come to avoiding that visit. God, working through Mother Teresa's example, took away what he calls "the unholy fear that had gripped me." (5)

Chuck Colson's life had been blessed immeasurably by his obedience to God. That's the message of Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. Mary did you know? Mary couldn't have known where this encounter would lead her. But today, two thousand years later, we know that truly she was favored by God. Be careful whom you called blessed. Be careful what you call impossible. And finally, be thankful that this Jewish teenager was obedient to God. That's the key to having a life that is truly blessed.

1. Composed by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene © 1991 Word Music/Rufus Music/ascap.
2. Ed Markquart, http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_the_virgin_maryGA.htm.
3. David Beckett, D.Min., <http://home.gci.net/~stjohn1/sermons/2001/dec23.01.htm>.
4. *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).
5. Charles Colson, *Being The Body* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2003, pp. 336-338).

II

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 Nadasi 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 bondslave 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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III Desiano

We might ask this in terms of our pandemic, with all our concerns about safety, masks, and the vaccine we believe will save us. We can ask this in terms of Christmas, our shopping and wrapping, our cards, and any travel plans we might have. And lots of people are asking this as they run out of the little money they had trying to keep their heads above water. And some even continue to ask it about our presidential election. But our Gospel asks us where we are in relationship to God. This Gospel, read so frequently during our Church year whenever we celebrate Mary, but read even more during this Advent period, presents ways for us to answer the question: where are we? Although we think of this Gospel as a slam-dunk—the Angel visits and we then have the Messiah—it shows different stages in Mary’s reaction, stages that can be of help to us. Mary’s first reaction is fear. She doesn’t know what is going on. She cannot fathom Gabriel’s greeting, generous as it was to her. His words leave her disturbed and puzzled. This first reaction of Mary shows where a lot of people are in terms of God: we fear God, and we are puzzled by God. And we can stay stuck in this stage because, in a way, it can make us feel justified. God is the one who causes fear; we are just trying to escape God’s fierceness.

Mary’s next reaction is question-asking. “Who are you and how is this to happen?” And many people are content with this stage in their relationship with God because as long as we can ask questions, the ball is in God’s court. We can imagine that we have the upper hand. Many people who are not connected with church ask questions all the time, but so do many people who consider themselves believers. Asking questions has created a whole industry which we call theology. But this can keep us distant from God and not bring us closer.

But the final reaction of Mary is the one that challenges us. She hears and accepts God’s direction in her life. She shows what St. Paul calls “the obedience of faith.” But we need to unpack this idea because “obedience” for us usually means being subservient to someone more powerful. The word actually means hearing at a deeper level. Obedience is when we are formed by God’s word because that word is speaking to our deepest needs. Obedience is not being forced; it’s accepting God and God’s love in a fuller, deeper way.

The first reading shows us that the project of faith isn’t what we do for God—but what we let God do for us and in us. As we await the coming of a child, the tenderest and most vulnerable form human life can take, we stand with Mary, putting aside the false approaches we have constructed to God, and looking for the signs of divine love that we can make more fully our own.