

**The Mystery at the Manger:
How Can This Be?
Luke 1:26-38**

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Dr. J. Howard Olds**

It has been said the best thing about Christianity is that no one could have guessed it! That the Omnipotent became an embryo, the Infinite an infant, the Almighty, a tiny child nursing at his mother's breast, is more than our small minds can comprehend. So the biggest challenge of Christmas is not busyness but belief. Will we let our mundane minds dance with mystery? Will the wonder of it all take precedent over the weariness of it all? Will the good news of great joy that Christ the Savior is born leap from the lines of our Christmas cards into the lineage of our lives? Ah, these are the questions of Christmas.

The story never gets more mysterious than here in Luke's gospel where the angel, Gabriel, pays a visit to Mary. Come let us marvel in the mystery of the manger.

Announcement: Luke 26-28

In the sixth month the angel, Gabriel, was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the House of David.

"Greetings, Mary, you are highly favored. The Lord is with you." Or if you have Roman Catholic heritage, "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus."

In paintings and poetry, with song and sculpture, the favoritism of Mary has been portrayed around the world. She graces with beauty the most prestigious museums of the world as well as candles and t-shirts at tourist traps around the globe.

In reality, this queen of heaven was a 13-15 year old peasant girl from the nowhere place of Nazareth, a hilly, hick town southeast of the Sea of Galilee, with a population of less than 100, counting chickens and dogs. She was engaged to a carpenter by the name of Joseph and was quite anxious to pledge her loyalty and sacred honor to this older man who would provide her a home and a family.

Who was Mary? She is an ordinary teenager, for whom God has an extraordinary mission, namely to give birth to the Son of God. Behold the mystery of Christmas.

Greetings Jim, Janice, Ben, Barbara. You are highly favored; the Lord is with you. What kind of a miracle would it take for you to believe that today? God has a message for you, a place for you in the midst of life, a particular mission for you to fulfill. That is what I want to suggest for you today.

We spend our lives unblest, upset and out. We trudge through our responsibilities without joy or meaning. We know the routine; we recite the ritual; but we miss the wonder, lose the excitement. What would it take to feel the brush of angel wings with news that you are highly favored; blessed beyond belief; loved with an everlasting love; known by an almighty God, and called upon by the Most High for a particular plan and purpose and place in our lives. Mary is not the only person to ever be favored.

If I had a Christmas wish for each of you, it would be that you could be just as I am without the dreaded disease of cancer. In the last 4 months I have been affirmed, encouraged, and blessed in ways I never deserved and can hardly imagine. Children write by the scores "We love you, Dr. Olds, please get well." People from my past write me long letters recounting some wedding, some retreat, or some sermon where their lives were significantly touched by God. You, like the Energizer bunny, keep giving and giving and giving. Sometimes when I finish my daily ritual of reading cards and notes from all of you, I ask myself the question: Why do people have to nearly die in order to be affirmed and appreciated? Why do so few have the privilege of knowing the significance of their lives?

Every Christmas I like to sit down and watch Frank Capra's, It's a Wonderful Life. I need to see the unlikely angel, Clarence, come to George Bailey in his most desperate hour saying, 'George, you haven't built highways and designed modern cities as you dreamed but you have made a difference in the lives of people in Bedford Falls and that makes your life worthwhile. You, George, are highly favored.'

Today I pray,
Angels from the realms of glory
Wing your flight o'er all the earth
You who sang creation's story
Show somebody their true worth.

Anxiety: Luke 32, 34-37

"How can this be?" Perplexing question, troubling question, ordinary question. Of course this thing is perplexing. *"But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be"* (Luke 1:29). *"How can this be,"* Mary asked, *"since I am a virgin"* (Luke 1:34)? The angel said to her, *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now your relative Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son; and is in the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."* Behold the miracle of Christmas.

Mary is not naïve. It is a matter of simple biology. She knows where babies come from. Since she has not done anything to make a baby, how can a baby be? That's a reasonable question, a thoughtful question.

The mystery of the virgin birth pales next to the mystery of the incarnation, the thought that God enters human history as an infant. How can this be?

Mary Lou Redding reminds us in her excellent book, While We Wait, we have permission to ask questions, to be less than sure, to engage God with our uncertainties. Great faith is not blind faith. Deep belief is not naïve belief. Obedience does not come automatically. There is more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds.

The answer to Mary's question is direct. 1) The Holy Spirit will come upon you—this is a God thing. 2) Your cousin Elizabeth is pregnant—miracles happen. 3) With God nothing is impossible.

What will it take for you to believe?

We begin with Affiliative Faith: We believe because others believe. A preacher's son was asked, "Boy, why do you believe in God?" The kid thought for a moment and said, "I guess it just runs in the family." A place for the family of faith, where beliefs are taught and hopes are nurtured.

Affiliative Faith becomes Searching Faith: This is a time to separate miracle from magic, Jesus from Superman, illusion of reality from the illumination of reality. Never discourage this journey. Mary needs to ask the questions. So do we, but don't get stuck here.

What we need is Mature Faith: Let our eyes be opened; we believe with a new heart, we embrace with a new spirit the truths of the faith. We see with new eyes. We have the ability to really see it and to grasp it. We are neither afraid of our questions, nor hampered by them either.

Max Lucado writes that for 51 years Bob Edens was blind. He couldn't see a thing. Bob felt his way through five decades of darkness. And then he could see. A skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and for the first time, Bob Edens had sight. "I would never have dreamed yellow is so yellow. I can see the shape of the moon and, of course, the sunrises and sunsets, as well as the stars at night. You could never know how wonderful everything is."

Mature faith is a set of eyes though which to see the world. I wish for you that vision today and the ability for you to expand the imagination until you can see it. Mature faith is a life of humility. It is knowing I do not have to know everything in order to enjoy everything. I do not understand how the Web works, or electricity or the telephone but I use them constantly just the same. I do not know the ways of God; they are too great for me. Frankly, some of them puzzle me.

But on I go not knowing, I would not if I might
I would rather walk in the dark with God
Than walk alone by sight.
I would rather walk with God by faith
Than walk alone in light.

Mature faith has the humility of belief.

Answer: Luke 1:38

Then Mary said, *“Let it be to me according to your word.”* The answer is simple and straight forward. I am the Lord’s servant. There is a popular song, Mary, Did you Know? *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? Mary did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? That this child you delivered, would soon deliver you?* Of course she didn’t know. That’s what servanthood is all about.

Do you know the difference between a volunteer and a servant? A volunteer helps out on his time, at his convenience when it fits his schedule. A servant serves the Lord instead of asking the Lord to serve her. Which way is it for you? If you could ask one thing of God this Christmas, what would it be? Lord, do this for me! Or Lord, let me be your servant.

Mike Slaughter likes to tell the story: I was 18 years old and a freshman at the University of Cincinnati when my home pastor asked me if I would like to help out with the youth group. I said, “I don’t know anything about youth groups, I am a youth myself.” He said, “Just show up and help the lady in charge.” So I did. When I came back the second week the lady in charge didn’t show up. All of a sudden it was me and these kids. For the next six years I tried to figure out who I was and what gifts were mine for serving.

“May it be to me as you have said.” Obedience. Like Mary we cannot understand what is going on. We cannot foresee what our future will be if we accept God’s will. We can only know that if God’s will is to be accomplished in this world, we must play our part in this preposterous plan.

Late one evening a professor sat at his desk working on lectures for the next day and shuffling through the mail and throwing most of it in the wastebasket. Casually he picked up a magazine delivered to his office by mistake and a specific article caught his attention. It was entitled, “The Needs of Christ in the Congo Mission.” It said the needs are great here. That night Albert Schweitzer said, “My search for purpose has ended. I have found my place to be.”

Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying, “Yes” to something beyond all our emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying, “Yes” to a hope based on God’s initiative which has nothing to do with what I think and feel. Christmas is

believing that the salvation of the world is God's work, not mine. If he can use me in the process, so be it. So this Christmas,

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May the Lord look with favor upon you
And give you peace and great purpose for living.

As surely as the Lord was with Mary, the Lord is with us.

Amen.