

How Can This Be?

These past few weeks, you've probably noticed them around you. It's that time of year when angels show up. At least, *images* of angels do. We've gotten used to seeing them on Christmas cards and gift wrap. We put angel ornaments on our Christmas trees. We wear angel pins, earrings, and pendants. Angels appear in TV shows and movies.

But have any of you ever actually *seen* an angel? Chances are, you have not. Normally, we relegate angels to the realm of the imagination. To a realm outside the parameters of empirical evidence of natural phenomena. If I told you that an angel had appeared to me, it's not likely you'd believe me. You'd probably react by saying: *How can this be?*

Yet angels continue to fascinate us. Maybe that's because, in this post-modern society, we've transmuted angels into whomever we want them to be. Sometimes they're little baby cherubim, chubby and cute. Sometimes they're graceful and feminine in form with, long, flowing tresses. Usually, they're there for our personal

convenience. To do our bidding. To grant our wishes. To protect us. Often, we think of them as *guardian* angels.

But the way popular culture envisions angels differs from what the Bible tells us about them. In sacred Scripture, angels are those who stand in the presence of God. Angels are usually depicted as winged beings. Angels need wings because they are messengers from God. The word “angel” *means* “message” or “messenger.” When an angel shows up to deliver a message from the Holy One, you can be sure that it’s going to be unsettling. You can be sure that it’s going to be life-changing. You can be sure that the life of whoever is on the receiving end of such a message will never again be the same.

That’s how it is in the opening scene of Luke’s Gospel. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are getting on in years. Now Elizabeth has never had a child. And in her day and time, being childless is a terrible thing for a woman. A disgrace! They call her barren. She’s the object of pity and scorn. And she’s well past the age of what used to be called *the change*. Then one day, the angel Gabriel appears to Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah. With a message that astonishes! Elizabeth will conceive a son. And he is to be named John.

After many years of infertility, a woman becomes pregnant. A woman long past her childbearing years is expecting a baby. With Zechariah, we respond in incredulity. *How can this be?*

But there's more. Much more. Six months later, this same Gabriel comes to Elizabeth's young kinswoman. A girl whose upcoming marriage to Joseph the carpenter has been arranged by her father. A girl still living at home with her parents. A girl barely into her teens. A girl named Mary. For Mary, the angel has astounding news. Mary is going to have a baby.

Now in a way, that's not so surprising. Still today, babies are born out of wedlock to girls Mary's age. Are they as fearful and as deeply troubled as Mary?

For, like her cousin Elizabeth, she's pregnant. But that's where the similarities end. Elizabeth has longed for a child. Yearned for a child. Prayed for a child.

Mary has not. The idea of having a baby anytime soon has probably never entered her head. Before the last year or so, she probably didn't even have the physical capability to become pregnant. And how will this pregnancy impact her future with Joseph? The consequences could be devastating for Mary. This is *so* not the right time for her to have a baby. *How can this be?*

It may not be the right time for Mary, but it *is* the right time, the fullness of time, the perfect time of the One who sends Gabriel to Mary. This is the One who breaks into human lives, upsetting and disrupting and realigning, not in accordance with *our* schedules, but in accordance with an altogether different timetable.

But this divine inbreaking causes us to ask questions. It caused Mary to ask. To wonder: *How can I have a baby? I've never been with a man. How can this be?*

How *can* this be? There are some today who still ask this question. There are some who question whether conception could have taken place in Mary's womb in the way Gabriel affirms it will take place. There are some who doubt that a virgin could give birth to a child.

But the word of God tells us that this is how it happened. And in our historic creeds, we confess it. It's one of the truths we treasure about the identity of this One born to Mary, even as we remember that he is the very One who desires that we live in love and unity with those whose theologies differ from our own. Believing what we believe about how he comes to us is just one of the ways in which we begin to understand that he is unlike any other. This son of Mary.

Gabriel's announcement of this child to be born is the most stupendous news ever heard! For he will be holy and will be called Son of the Highest. He is to be named Jesus.

Now, you know that names carry meaning. This name carries meaning. Mary, like every other faithful Jew, knows the meaning of the name *Jesus*. Knows it means *God will save*.

This name lies at the heart of the message God sends by Gabriel for Mary—and for us today. Mary hears God's message. Mary trusts. And in that trust—somewhere outside the constellation of her own anxieties and apprehensions—Mary finds courage. Incredible courage.

The courage to say *yes. Here am I, Lord. I turn my life over to you. Let me be your instrument. Let me be useful in fulfilling your purpose.*

The purpose of this One who has placed a call and a claim on Mary's life. This One who has placed a call and a claim on your life and on mine. When we hear them, we may not—just as Mary did not—fathom what this claim will involve and where this call will take us. We may not be able to foresee the joy and the sorrow they will bring. We may not be able to discern how our lives will

change. Yet, even so, we are given the grace to respond with Mary: *yes, Lord. Here am I.*

And this Sunday, deep in the season of Advent—if we listen carefully—we hear Mary lifting her voice in a song as ancient as the prophets and as new as tomorrow:

God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly.

God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away.

But this doesn't sound like the world we know. This isn't the way the twenty-first century world works. Is it? Twenty-first century people have gotten used to seeing the rich get richer and the powerful get more power. Twenty-first century people are skeptical that these radical reversals of Mary's song could really happen. It's been said that we're *affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age*. We're products of the age of reason. It's like believing in angels. If it lacks a logical explanation, if it's not rationally verifiable, it's not easy for twenty-first century people to accept. So we ask *how can this be?*

And—thankfully—we get the same answer Mary got. It can be...because God. Because with God, nothing is impossible. Later in Luke's Gospel, we hear Mary's son tell us that *what is impossible for mortals is possible for God*.

This God for whom all things are possible has a purpose. From the foundation of time, God has planned how this great purpose will be fulfilled. For long ages, that plan was a mystery, a mystery Paul writes about to believers in Rome. That mystery, long kept secret, is revealed in Mary's son Jesus. In him, we receive the gift of faith.

It's through faith that it becomes possible for you and me to embrace mystery and wonder. And miracle! The miracle of the One conceived by the Spirit. The miracle of the One born of a virgin. The miracle of the incarnate One who from Mary's womb comes to be God among us.

Because this God for whom all things are possible will stop at *nothing* to be with us. This God for whom nothing is impossible comes to us in helplessness, in vulnerability, in the humblest of circumstances, in a stable in a small village in an out-of-the-way corner of an earthly empire. This God for whom nothing is impossible puts on flesh and comes, truly human *and* truly divine,

to reach us and to save us. This is the One who had to be human in order to reach us. This is the One who had to be divine in order to save us.

To save *us*? Us? Sin-damaged human creatures? We are to be pardoned? We are to be forgiven? We are to receive mercy? We are to be blessed by grace? Once more, we ask: *how can this be?*

As Trevor Howard points out, “‘How can this be?’ is the question of all humanity in the face of the redemption and regeneration wrought in them by Christ.”

By him whose mother Mary shows us how to be the servants he calls us to be. Mary shows us how to be his disciples. From Mary, on the way to Christmas, we learn conviction born of hope. From Mary, we learn commitment. From Mary, we learn obedience. With Mary, you and I can help bear Christ. With Mary, we can help bring God into this world. We can help bring about God’s prayed-for reign on earth! So that in this peaceable kingdom, Mary’s song—and all the things about which we ponder: *how can this be?*—become reality through the One born in Bethlehem. The One who saves. The One whose wonderful name is Jesus.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.