

“How can this be?”

It is only from the gospel of Luke that we have the narrative I read this morning about the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, that young peasant girl from the village of Nazareth. It is from this narrative that we have the description of her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, also experiencing a most unexpected pregnancy. These passages are those that form our images of her. Somehow when we see her through Luke’s eyes she appears a little one dimensional, an unquestioning and obedient servant of God’s will. Or are we just overlooking a key point in the narrative? In the town of Nazareth, which is no longer a small village there are actually two churches of the Annunciation, two places about a visit of Gabriel to Mary. It is not usual in the land of Palestine to find more than one site where Biblical events are reported to have occurred. But usually although the sites differ, the traditions about the events are alike. Yet in Nazareth this is not exactly the truth. There are two traditions about Mary and Gabriel’s encounter. Traditions there records that the angel Gabriel made two visits to the young girl Mary. Mary’s home in Nazareth is the site of the Roman Catholic Annunciation Church while the Greek Orthodox Annunciation Church is at the site known as Mary’s well. It seems that in the village of Nazareth there was a well from which all the residents drew their water. It would have been the job of someone of Mary’s age and status as a daughter of the household to go to the well daily and draw the water for her family’s use. She would then carry it back to their home which was a grotto as most homes in the region were made in the local caves. According to this tradition, the angel Gabriel’s first visit to Mary was at the village well—he appeared to her to announce to her that she had found favor with the Lord—and her response to the message was to flee in fear. The tradition we have from the gospel of Luke according to the local lore is the second time that she was given the message about her future role in God’s plan. I have often thought about those two traditions since learning of them while visiting Nazareth—imagining a young peasant girl from a small village whose life is proceeding along expected routes. Her future has been arranged by her parents through a marriage contract to a up-standing man from their village named Joseph. She is not yet married, but that contract is as binding as the actual ceremony—In the eyes of her family, Joseph and the villagers she is his wife. Any violation of the expectations of the marriage contract would subject her to several things none of them pleasant—including being stoned to death as an adulteress if she were not virgin when the marriage took place. The idea of becoming pregnant would not have seemed like being favored. Descriptions of the archangels, those messengers of God, portray them as awesome and fearsome in appearance. Facing an angel and hearing the message seems like it would have been a traumatic experience for anyone. When Gabriel shows up whether for the first or second time with this message and greets her saying, “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.” We are told that her response is puzzlement. She is perplexed by his words. She doesn’t understand why she would receive the visit – how she could have gotten the attention of the Lord, much less have gained favor. Gabriel reassures her: Do not be afraid, Mary , for you have found favor with God. “ Then he relates exactly what that the favor she has gained is. Not sure it would have seemed like being favored in her situation: to conceive in her womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Being a girl for whom this should not have been a possibility, especially without the participation of Joseph would not have seemed like a good thing. Gabriel goes on to describe Jesus as the future king who will ascend the throne of his

ancestor David—and in most of our Christmas plays Mary kneeling on the stage with her head demurely covered and bowed then says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” That makes it sound as if her acceptance of this news was immediate and easy. Yet that is not what our passage reveals. It tells us that Mary says when first given the news—instead says to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The answer given to this throughout the centuries has been varied, and most tend to obscure what is being revealed within this passage. We have tended to get caught up in the how this was possible. Some traditions have venerated her, some have discredited her role, and there are many other stances lying between these that have been proposed. In these discussions what is most often overlooked is that Luke was not actually writing a history as we understand history, but was presenting a theological argument about who God is and who we are before God. Understanding this is to stand on the precipice of a great mystery...asking like Mary, How can this be? Not asking how can she be pregnant, but how can it be that God has noticed her. As Luke fashions his story about the encounter between Gabriel and Mary some sixty years later what he is trying to do is convey some basic theological truths as had been revealed to him; truths which may have some historical grounding in an encounter which Mary may have described to others. Not surprisingly one of the key truths that Luke explores, not just in this story, but throughout his entire gospel account is the incomprehension and incredulity of people when they encounter the divine. When Mary encounters the divine through Gabriel, she is perplexed, she ponders his words, and she even has doubts as shown by her question: “How can this be?” It’s like there is a pause between hearing the message and the acceptance which we uplift from verse 38. Within Luke’s first chapter, Mary moves from questioning to acceptance and then in her visit with Elizabeth to praise and thanksgiving. This is in many ways the journey of faith which most of us make. Luke tells us the even Mary who bore Jesus in her womb found it difficult to comprehend and accept what God might be doing and that the reality of any encounter with God can lead us into confusion and questioning, “How can this be?”. Thinking of God’s persistent reaching out to those who continually rebel against what God reveals as the way we are to interact with God and each other—if we really think about it, does not Mary’s question resonant with us: “How can this be?” How can we understand a love which offers so much grace and forgiveness? Goes to such extremes to demonstrate to us how loved we are? This story reveals to us that God chose in God’s own mysterious way to reach into Mary and create within her a new life. Psalm 139 describes this reaching of God into all our lives this way: “you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb”. There is an awesomeness and mystery to be embraced in the miracle of life; in the gift of what makes us creatures created in the image of God. So when God does this with Mary, he did so in a new way. He did something new in creation. But as Gabriel’s parting words to Mary about her cousin Elizabeth who was believed to be barren explained: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” God who creates the whole world has no barriers to what can be done; the miracle is what God chooses to do. This is the miracle of incarnation, the eternal Word of God being made flesh, he is a new creation. For many of us the cross is the focal point of our faith and rightly so. Yet the cross is given its meaning so profoundly because of who we believe was placed on that cross—God Incarnate: the Word made flesh knit together in Mary’s womb. This is why this story we retell every year is so important. In this story we have revealed to us a theological truth that has us standing open mouthed and wide eyed asking like Mary, “How can

this be?" The question we are really asking is not so much how it was possible physically, but how is it possible that God loves, chooses and pursues us with such determined faithfulness; pursues us so that we can be gathered and redeemed. There is no answer for that mystery, there is only a response like Mary's: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". Then with joyful and grateful hearts we also lift up our thanksgiving and praise to God for the gifts we receive. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.