

How Can This Be...Let It Be

Within the reading from Luke's narrative about the visit of the archangel Gabriel to that peasant girl in the village of Nazareth there are two phrases spoken by her that are very profound. These two phrases have echoed throughout our theology and our traditions ever since the beginning...they have formed the battleground for the fracturing of the faith...and have been the basis of debate and doubt for many individuals as well. Our text comes from the first chapter of Luke; verses 26 through 38 which describe what is called the annunciation. There are actually two sites in modern day Nazareth which claim to be the site of this event. The Greek Orthodox Church site is where they built a church around a spring though to be where Mary would have gone to get water from the well for her family and the Roman Catholic Church site which built around what is traditionally held to be Mary's family home. Both traditions strongly attest to the visitation having taken place at their site; to the announcement of God's intention to intervene in the course of human history in this manner; to God's plan to come into the world as a vulnerable infant, not just an infant, but one whose birth situation would have multiplied and magnified that vulnerability beyond our imagining. God's ways surely are not ways that are expected if we were the ones drawing up plans for a successful venture. Additionally, we have shrouded this encounter between messenger and this young peasant girl under so many layers of theology, piety, and politics that she's nearly impossible to excavate. All of us are familiar with her story, yet as the mother of Jesus, she somehow remains covered in mystery. Some of us, who follow her son, pray to her. Others ignore her on principle. Some call her a victim of divine coercion, after all, who could refuse God. Others, "Theotokos", the Mother of God. For some, she represents a troubling model of pious femininity—ever sinless, ever the virgin, ever mother. For still others, she is a child prophet extraordinaire—a young girl who fearlessly announced the arrival of God's kingdom to earth in the words of the Magnificat. For all our familiarity with Mary's story, it leaves us with more questions than answers. Consider what Luke tells us before we have the conversation where Gabriel speaks to Mary. Luke begins his narrative by connecting Mary and Jesus' story to that of Elizabeth and the child she is carrying: the angel Gabriel's visit happens in the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth, who like Abraham's wife Sarah and others in Scriptures believed to be barren, are not through God's actions. This introduction also tells us that this visit is to a virgin who is engaged to Joseph. According to their culture, engagement means they are recognized as a couple who just have

not yet completed the final vows. It is just a formality that they are not married. This introduction also tells us about Joseph's connection to the house of David which lineage plays such a role in the theology which later develops. The actual interaction that follows is really rather startling in its brevity. The angel greets Mary, calling her God's "favored one" in most translations. Luke tells us "she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" but evidently she asks no questions at the greeting. Luke narrates Gabriel offers her reassurance with these words: "Do not be afraid, Mary for you have found favor with God." Then Gabriel tells her God's plan for a miraculous conception, the sex and name of the child and his future. Mary expresses her doubt about this plan, by asking ONE question. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And the one question she asked is one over which so many people keep stumbling in their walk of faith..."How can this be?" In walks of faith, it surprises me that people seem to want to ask the one who created heaven and earth, who spoke all life into being how can THIS be when they come to the story of the nativity?...I can understand why Mary would ask that question when given this news...it would have to be an astonishing thing to consider personally...but to ask the Lord of all creation about the mechanics of accomplishing this task does not seem to me to be an issue for a walk of faith. Why do so many become so concerned over the mechanics of how our Lord Jesus came to earth? The wonder of it is the amazing love revealed in the act; that amazing love seems should be what causes us to ask the question: "How can this be?" Just before Gabriel gave her the details of the plan, Gabriel told Mary that she had found "favor" with God. His greeting called her "favored one" and his reassurance reaffirmed that she had found "favor" with God. Even before hearing what this "favor" she had found with God was going to mean, the narrative says Mary was perplexed by Gabriel's words and pondered what they might mean. She seems perplexed that God has sent someone to tell her that she is blessed...not that she will be blessed, but that she is blessed. The tenses in the passage are present passive. Gabriel's greeting to her informs her that she has already received God's blessing. When Mary gives her reply, she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Mary considers herself God's servant, she may be surprised that God is singling her out, but she considers herself as one who is to serve God. Considering what is to come, unlike Mary, I would probably have been more rather than less perplexed when learning what this "favor" meant. In Greek, the word is also often translated differently in the New Testament. Elsewhere it would read that she is to be the recipient of grace. So let us go back to that initial encounter and response and use that translation. Mary

is perplexed and ponders what it might mean that God's messenger has come to tell her that she is the recipient of God's grace. The one question she did voice had to do with the mechanics of her virginity, but she didn't question that it was possible...when Gabriel told her the Holy Spirit would accomplish it, she accepted that because with God all things are possible, or literally in the Greek nothing is impossible. When you think of her situation and what it probably actually meant in her life...the conversations she must have had with her parents, with Joseph, with the neighbors...all those immediate concerns and scandals to the dangers of the flight to Egypt to the pain and trauma of her son's crucifixion...we really have not been given any clue as to what questions could have been present in her mind; what question she might have had. Being "favored of God" was not equated with wealth, health, comfort or ease in Mary's case. God's call on her life required her to be profoundly countercultural, to trust in an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her; it demanded courage and a deep and abiding faith in her God who "favored" her. But Mary's response to God was unwavering...after the one question, she placed her trust in the promise that God has always made...that whatever befalls we are not alone...that was the grace that Mary counted on...that was the grace which did not fail her...it was her total trust in that grace that allowed her to say without any further questions..."Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Of course, I doubt that it was really that simple, I doubt that there were not times when the difficulties and pain of the things required of her did test her...but God did extend to her that grace which is called favor in our gospels...God was with her on her journey. I think that now we should of this question for ourselves in terms of God's grace extended to us: How can this be? in terms of how can it be that God consistently pursues us with the grace of such steadfast love. When we read this passage rather than the mechanics of a virgin birth we come closer to the real miracle of the nativity of Jesus if we consider that despite the world's brokenness and darkness, Christ is still waiting to come and reside in our hearts if we come to kneel at the cradle in Bethlehem. Isn't that the true miracle that we celebrate when we come to kneel at the cradle in Bethlehem; that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that the world might be saved. The entire way of God's plan of redemption for the world is an act of grace, of favor bestowed on this broken world, that the mystery of it is so much deeper than the how, that concern over the how seems trivial. The central truth is that God is love; and through God's grace and love we do not have to be concerned with the "How can this be" we need only bow our heads,

give thanks and with Mary say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” Knowing that God will go with us all the way. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.