

Mary, Prophet of God
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Luke 2:26-38, 46-56

This year got me thinking what it must have felt like to be the angel Gabriel. Can you imagine him standing at the doorway entry, before he started glowing or doing whatever it is angels do to make others realize, this is no ordinary human appearing before them? I imagine Gabriel gazing at this person, who was in that liminal space between girlhood and womanhood. Gabriel knew that what he would invite Mary to do would completely change the course of her life, forever. Not only that; it would completely change the course of the world.

In my imagination, Gabriel watched her silently, debating whether or not to say anything, or to just let her be. Maybe he could pick a different girl, or even better, a woman who had at least given birth before. I know for me, there is a slight trepidation in asking people to do things. In my first job out of college, I interned at the Presbyterian United Nations Office. I had to call human rights experts and sometimes diplomats and ask them to lead seminars or briefings on world affairs for our dinky little church office. I would practice in my head three or four times before finally making the call, feeling tiny for bursting in on their important work of saving the world to come talk to our church people, who for the most part cannot return political favors. But sometimes, amazingly, they would say yes! Today, even though I have had a career of asking people to do things, whether simple things like reading scripture in worship, or big things like changing their lives for Jesus, I still feel humbled to ask anyone to re-order their lives in big or small ways.

So even though Gabriel was an angel, or like one of God's special agents, I wonder if he too felt humbled by making such a big ask. "OK, spit it out, Gabriel," I can imagine him muttering to himself while pacing the doorway in his pre-Annunciation pep talk. Amazingly, he didn't follow up his speech of "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and name him Jesus" with a quick "You can say no if you're too busy or frightened; I could probably work on finding someone else."

But Gabriel spit out the big ask. "Wait," you may ask me. "Doesn't the angel *tell* Mary rather than *ask* her?" Certainly, in this #MeToo moment, that is an important question. If we didn't already realize how important consent is, we are hopefully learning now. But if you look at the angel's words, they are in the future tense. "You *will* conceive and bear a child; the Holy Spirit *will* come upon you; the power of the most High *will* overpower you; the child *to be* born *will be* holy." The angel is speaking prophecy; it is not putting a hand on the lock door button and giving Mary no way out. I believe Mary was just as free to walk away from it all as you are free to walk out on this sermon. All the angel needs to hear for this amazing thing to happen is Mary's *will*.

Mary asks, "*How can this be?*" and after Gabriel offers some rather vague mechanics, Mary says yes: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." While the church has often portrayed Mary as meek and mild, I imagine her being anything but. Much better adjectives could describe Mary: Bold. Courageous. Unbound by expectations on gender and sexuality. Months later, her body would pulse God's body out into the world to live among us.

Gabriel prophesied that Mary would do something incredible. In agreeing to partner with God in this plan to bring forth Jesus, Mary also joined the prophetic imagination of what God's world could be. In her song she prophesied of the reversal of power and the overturning of convention. But

rather than saying that God will make these things happen, she speaks of them like they have already been accomplished:

“God *has* shown strength with his arm; he *has* scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He *has* brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he *has* filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He *has* helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy”

Mary speaks of a vision that has already arrived. As bearer of Immanuel, God-with-Us, she presents to us the world as it would be through God’s eyes. In doing so, she sets forth the norm for how things ought to be.

On Friday I picked my daughter up from the half-day at school, and she tagged around while I ran some errands. We had to run into a store in Fort Lee, and it was in a shopping center so crowded that cars waiting to park were lined up along the curb to follow shoppers returning to their cars. Once we finally parked and were ready to go, Kai sprung herself out of her carseat, swinging open the backseat door. I saw it happen in slow motion, and though I was only steps away, I could not get to her car door in time-- which bounced right into the white minivan parked right next to ours. At the same time, I realized the minivan was not empty. The driver turned backwards in her seat to see what had happened while I rushed my fingers against the black scratch that had appeared on the white paint of the minivan. I began trying to rub the scratch out-- it wasn’t rubbing out. I simultaneously began finding the words to both let my daughter know she should have been more careful, while also preparing to protect her from the wrath that was certainly about to emerge from the car. Would there be yelling? Cursing? Name-calling to my child, or for her mother for being foolish enough to let a 5 year old open her own car door? Demands for cash? I haven’t lived in New Jersey my whole life, but I have lived here long enough to know that of the things people in New Jersey can be gracious about, accidents and cars don’t seem to be one of them.

The car door opened, and I began apologizing immediately and nudging my daughter to join me. The woman cut me off.

“Stop,” she said. “It’s just a car, and it’s the holidays. I have kids too and they could have just as easily done the same thing. I hope someone would be as forgiving to them. You’re going to do me a favor: next time someone accidentally scratches your car or something similar, you will just let it go. Have a happy holiday.”

She spoke with the prophet’s confidence that she could already see this playing out. And then her whole family-- a dad and two boys-- emerged from the minivan and followed her like ducklings to do their Christmas errands.

I wanted to follow her too. She taught a lesson to my daughter-- who seemed very remorseful about the scratch-- that was far better than what her pastor mother could on an ordinary day of Christmas errands. She prophesied to us, modeling with a calm confidence the kindness and graciousness she would want the world to offer to the children in her car, and setting forth the vision that we would too to pay it forward, showing that kindness and graciousness to someone else.

Mary carried Jesus in her body, not her car. God asks us each year at Christmas to pay it forward and hold Jesus in our bodies, too. Not only that, but to treat others as if they were bearers of the Christ child too. In Mary’s eyes, it has already happened. That is how she sees the world-- set with the standard God intends for it.

So let the prophetic nature of Mary’s vision be the lens through which we see God’s world. Do not accept answers that tell you that’s not how the world works. Do not be bound by what is possible and impossible. We

Christians are bearers of the divine, who is born in us anew. Anything can happen. Amen.