Living Like Mary in the Optative Mode

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. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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 this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. — Luke 1:26-38

Often we hear in sermons delivered by our brother and sister fundamentalist Christian preachers that "God has a plan for your life!" I don't know, I don't think that God works that way, creating individualized blueprints for our lives. Nowhere in scripture will you find that God promises to deliver a "plan" with your name on it, one that's all worked out just for you.

By contrast, however, over and over again throughout the Bible, in the Hebrew Scriptures and especially in the Gospels and Epistles, God is portrayed as calling people. In scripture, time and again, God calls the most unlikely of individuals to traverse a path through life with the detailed road map completely missing. A plan gives you all the answers; a call leaves you with so many questions.

Nowhere is God's calling more prominent or more pivotal, or more provocative than in today's Gospel story of the Annunciation, the Calling of Mary, the Mother of our Lord. Now, when I think of this story of the Archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she has been called, I cannot help but see with my mind and my heart's eyes Fra Angelico's rainbow-wingéd angel, a creature decidedly, "from the realms of glory," announcing God's Call to Mary.



The Archangel Gabriel from The Annunciation, frescoe by Fra Angelico

And then I see Fra Angelico's Mary,



The Virgin Mary from The Annunciation, frescoe by Fra Angelico

depicted as the oh-so-young, fresh-as-dawn, surpassingly beautiful child-woman, Mary, the heartbreakingly human, 'what-is-happening to me?' Mary, the exemplar of all that is weak and frail and incapable, the 'not-at-all-ready-for-this' Mary, paradigm for our own confused and uncertain callings in life.



The Annunciation, frescoe by Fra Angelico

Now, Mary had questions. She wanted to know whether what God was asking her to do was even possible for the likes of her!

Consider God's remarkable answer: the usual translation for God's response through the messenger Gabriel is: "Nothing is impossible with God." That's good, but the literal, more accurate translation for that passage is this: "Nothing that is God's word for you can be impossible." (Luke 1:37) It proved true for Mary, and it is there in the scriptures for us, as well. It's a promise that we can apply to our own unlikely lives: nothing that is God's word meant especially for you or for me can be impossible for our God to accomplish.

With her question answered, Mary is portrayed as embracing her calling in an extraordinary way. St. Luke sets her 'yes,' to God in the rarely used, (but here, intentionally applied), optative mood. A 'mood' in grammar simply describes the condition of a verb. In English, there are five moods: the conditional, the imperative, the indicative, the interrogative, and the subjunctive mood. Biblical Greek has all those moods for verbs plus one more, the distinctive optative mood actually contains three meanings at once! So, with the single phrase, "Let it be done!" Mary gives her permission, expresses her desire and declares her hope that what God has in store for her will take place. Permission, desire and expectation — in one spare, phrase, three very rich meanings!

Mary gives God permission to use her. If only we could do that! There is so much that God wants for us that we don't want to allow for ourselves! We can find all sorts of excuses for not saying yes to God.

We're just like the wild turkey that lives on our land with whom I've developed an intimate relationship in recent weeks! Several times this fall I was awakened early in the morning by what sounded like somebody pounding on a basement window just below our bedroom. Finally, after the third alarming wake-up call, I knew I had to get up and investigate. What I found was a huge Tom turkey pounding his head on our basement window, which, in the early morning light, had become a perfect mirror reflecting back to this aggressive old bird an image of his own, threatening male self!

Sometimes, like that turkey, we can't get out of our own way in life! We're trapped byfears that drive us and at the same time hold us back. Mary, by contrast, with her "let it be done" committed herself to getting herself out of the way, thus making room for God's way in her life.

With the second meaning of her 'yes' in the optative mood, Mary joins her will with God's: "I want only what you want, too," she says in effect. That's the one prayerful wish we can be sure that God will always answer! It's powerful: "Do what you want with me, I want that too!" says Mary, and the Savior of the world was born!

Using the third sense of the optative mode, Mary responds with a yearning heart full of hope and expectation. She's eager to give herself to what she now fully hopes for!' The author Barbara

Kingsolver tells us: “The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it.”

Mary, despite her initial skepticism and deep confusion, finally said a resounding 'yes' to God with all the conviction, passion and trust her young heart could muster. But what if Mary had said ‘no’ to God and sent the angel Gabriel packing? She was certainly free to do so. And so, of course, are we! What a tragedy it would have been, had Mary declined! What a tragedy it is when you and I refuse to listen to our loving God. Our Lord wants so much for us, but always leaves us free not to say ‘yes' to our call!

Believe this: just as God once greeted Mary, God greets you now as God’s “favored one.” As with Mary, “the Lord is also with you.” (Luke 1:28b) God favors you with a calling for which you, yourself, will not write the script; something, indeed, for which there is no script. Should you embrace it, God’s call for you will always be unexpected, will prove forever difficult, but will ultimately reveal itself as deeply fulfilling.

Each of us is called to live our lives like Mary in the optative mood: to get our selves out of God’s way for us, to give God permission to use us, to say 'yes' to God with great passion and with fierce expectation. Embrace Mary as your sister in faith, and

believe, as she chose to trust, that nothing / that God wants for you, O favored one, / is impossible / for our God.

Amen.

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