

Perplexed
Luke 1.26-38
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Advent 1

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And Gabriel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by these words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸Then 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. (NRSV)

If there's anything we Americans want in our leaders, it's confidence. From the mayor to the governor to the president, we want to hear our leaders exude confidence. Even if our leaders stretch the truth a little, we still want them to sound confident.

Historians sometimes say that one reason Franklin Roosevelt was popular as a president is because he projected enormous confidence to the American people. In the frustrating days of the Great Depression and the fearful days of World War II, President Roosevelt's supreme confidence in a better future helped to turn the country around psychologically.

So important is confidence that we can scarcely imagine what would happen if our political leaders admitted their own confusion and uncertainty. Suppose President Obama stood up in front of reporters and said something like the following: "I'm frankly perplexed about how the United States should respond to the radical Islamic group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). We can bomb them, but I don't think that will make them go away. We could send troops to fight them, but that might just make the situation worse. I'm just not sure how to deal with this problem." It's doubtful the President would ever say such a thing, but if he did the criticism would likely be harsh.

Some people might even call for his impeachment on the grounds that the President was incompetent and should be booted from office.

We Christians also look for confidence in our pastors, conference ministers, and denominational executives. Consider the conversation about same-sex marriage in the Mennonite Church USA. Congregations sometimes want their pastors to take a stand one way or the other on same-sex marriage, to vigorously and decisively defend one particular point of view. As an outsider looking at those congregations, you might think the pastor is leading the congregation in one direction or the other. However, in reality the opposite is often true: people in those congregations are pushing the pastor to take a public stand, and so the pastor feels that to stay employed he or she has to do as the congregation wants and act decisively. This dynamic can also happen in conferences. Congregations and their pastors sometimes urge the conference minister or the conference executive board to take a stand for or against same-sex marriage. On the national level, conferences sometimes urge the denomination to take a firmer stand, either for or against.

Throughout the various layers of the Mennonite Church USA, we keep pushing our leaders to be decisive on same-sex marriage. But of course if our leaders take a stand that we don't agree with, then we find it easy to criticize them.

The truth of the matter, however, is that a lot of Mennonite leaders are actually perplexed about same-sex marriage. Not all, but many are. At least that's what I hear from quite a few of the pastors I talk with. We pastors might be perplexed about what we personally believe; we might be perplexed about what we can do in our congregations, conferences, or denomination that might actually be helpful; and almost all of us are perplexed about what will eventually happen to Mennonite Church USA.

If you look deeply into your own life, I think you'll find that you too are perplexed about some things. Maybe you're not perplexed about same-sex marriage, but I'm guessing you're perplexed about something. Perhaps you're in the middle of a thorny situation with a member of your family—such as a child, a sibling, a parent, or an in-law—and you genuinely don't know what to do. Maybe you don't even know what to

think. The situation is so dicey and complex that you're baffled over what a good solution would even look like.

Or perhaps you're in the middle of something at work that puzzles you. It could be a situation that you've never faced before and so you don't quite know how to proceed. Or it could be a situation you *have* faced before but it seems just as intractable now as it was the first time you encountered it. In either case, you're perplexed.

Mary was profoundly perplexed when Gabriel came to visit her. Today and for the next five weeks we're exploring six different aspects, or "faces," of Mary. Each time we'll use a different story from the life of Mary to try and understand more about her experience as the mother, and eventually as the disciple, of Jesus. In today's story the operative word is "perplexed."

And if you were in Mary's sandals, wouldn't you be perplexed? There you are, a thoughtful young woman maybe no more than 12 or 13 or 14 years old, and an angel stops by for a visit. That alone would perplex just about anyone, since angels aren't in the habit of scheduling nice little social visits over tea and scones. No, no. Angels have business, weighty business, and when one comes by it generally means something huge is going to happen to you. Sometimes an angel's business is so huge and life-changing that when the visit is over, you find yourself wishing the angel had not come at all.

This particular angel begins with an odd greeting: "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary, poor thing, was "much perplexed" about what this greeting meant. The last part of the greeting sounded fine, since just about everyone is glad to hear that the Lord is with them. But Mary was confused about the first part of the greeting. According to the angel she was a "favored one?" What was that supposed to mean? Was that good news or bad news? Falling into God's favor might mean that God wants you to do something you never thought of doing. "Favored" might have enormous consequences for you and others in your life. "Favored" could turn out to be a blessing or a burden, depending on what it meant.

Her mind may have been spinning through dozens of possible scenarios, but Mary had the sense to keep her mouth shut for the moment and just listen to what else the angel had to say. Gabriel forges ahead with the rest of his announcement.

You, Mary, are favored by God. Don't be afraid, because that's a good thing, not a bad thing. God would like to give you the gift of a child, a son, who will have an extraordinary relationship with God. Though he will grow in your womb like any child, he will be rather different than other children. He will be known as God's son, as royalty in the line of David. You, Mary, are the recipient of a great honor.

Mary is doubtless stunned by all this, but nevertheless finds her voice. "How can this be?" she asks with perplexity in her voice. What are you talking about, angel? How could such a thing possibly happen, and how could it happen to someone like me, an insignificant person who lives in an insignificant village who hasn't yet even lied with a man?

Gabriel then explains—patiently, I think—that the Spirit of God can do anything. Notice that Gabriel does not plunge into a biological explanation for all this. The angel simply isn't concerned about questions of sperm and egg and sexual intercourse. Our 21st century minds might want to go there, but Gabriel's mind does not. As a messenger from God, Gabriel's mind is focused on the theological aspect of this rather than the biological aspect. God's Spirit is able to form this child in you, Mary, because the Spirit is endlessly inventive and passionately creative. God has abilities you don't know anything about. Yours is not to ask how. The how is God's business, not yours. Yours is only to answer whether you are willing for this to happen—or whether you are not willing. So, Mary, is this ok with you?

While a literal reading of the story may not make this clear, a theological reading of the story knows that Mary has a choice at this moment. God is not in the business of forcing teenage girls into pregnancies they don't want. Human freedom is enormously important to God, and God goes to great lengths to honor, preserve, and protect our freedom to say yes—or to say no—when God asks us to do something. Let us never forget that Mary has a genuine choice in this moment. Gabriel, and God, are looking for some

kind of consent from Mary, some kind of yes that permits the Spirit to go ahead and do this.

The story doesn't say it happened this way, but I imagine that Mary, thoughtful person that she was, paused at this point to consider God's invitation. Did she pause 5 seconds, 5 minutes, or 15 minutes? I don't know. But however long the pause was, Mary eventually gave her consent. In that moment there is no way she could have known all the consequences of giving her consent. She could not have known that when this child would be 12 years old, he would get lost in theological conversation with rabbis in the Temple (Lk. 2.41-51). She could not have known that as an adult, this child would claim that the family of fellow disciples is more important than the family of biology (Lk. 8.19-21). And she could not have known that one day this child, flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone, would hang from a Roman cross under the hot Mediterranean sun.

At that moment she knew none of this. Yet even in her state of perplexity, Mary gave her consent. She agreed to participate in God's mission, not knowing where this mission might take her or what this mission might cost her. Mary said yes!

With this yes, Mary became a key person—a leader, if you will—in God's worldwide missional movement. She hosted the holy in her own body and in her own spirit. She accepted the invitation to become a partner with God. She willingly helped God to accomplish what God wanted to accomplish.

Her perplexity did not hinder God's mission in the slightest. God can work with our uncertainty. God gladly uses us in spite of our confusion. God isn't looking for people who are clear and certain about everything. What matters more to God is a willing spirit, which in spite of perplexity, nevertheless says yes.