

Tell me how did you feel when the angel came into the garden?
 How did you feel? How did you feel?
 When he said, "If you're afraid, I beg your pardon,
 but you're the one to bear God's Son."

Tell me how did you feel? How did you feel?
 Oh Momma, Momma Mary,
 We wish you joy. We wish you joy.
 Oh Momma, Momma Mary,
 Your little boy, your little boy,
 Soon to be our Savior.

Tell me how did you feel on the final day?
 How did you feel? How did you feel?
 When you arrived in Bethlehem to hear them say,
 "No food, no table;
 Stay in the stable."

Tell me how did you feel when the wise men came to see him.
 How did you feel? How did you feel?
 When shepherds and kings with precious things adored him,
 It had begun. Here was the One.

Roger Whittaker

The Turning Point

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. If Luke meant the sixth month of the year, he meant the sixth month of the Jewish calendar. The Jewish New Year is called *Rosh Hashanah*. This year *Rosh Hashanah* fell on September 17-18. Six months from then would be March 17-18. Nine months from then would be December 17-18. If Mary delivered her Firstborn a week late, His birthdate would be December 25. That is one way the Church might reason its way to the day when we celebrate Christmas. I thought you'd want to know.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." In Latin the angel's words are as follows: "Ave, Maria, gratia plena. Dominus tecum." The "Ave Maria" or "Hail, Mary" prayer that forms the foundation of the Catholic Rosary builds directly on this scripture. I thought you'd want to know.

What happened next bears witness to the cause of the worldwide celebration of Jesus' birth and of the honor owed to Mary as one who is uniquely worthy of honor.

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

This is high drama, exalted language, and unthinkable possibilities. A royal Son of the Most High, sitting on the reconstituted throne of King David of old, reigning permanently over Israel – what did she know of such things? Little people like Mary of Nazareth have no resources within themselves to process such an angel and such a message. Mary with her great good sense didn't try except where she was sure of herself.

But she knew where babies came from, and she knew what was expected of a young, pious, and engaged girl like herself in the small, gossipy hamlet of Nazareth. So, she responded: **“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin? I'm not married yet.”**

Her restraint and good sense were met with even less understandable angel talk. **The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”** How would anyone make sense of that? The angel gave her something else to think about that she wasn't expecting, but she could understand it.

“Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.” It's not hard to imagine Mary in days gone by asking her mother the embarrassing question, “Why doesn't Aunt Elizabeth have children?” It's not hard to imagine her mother saying, “We don't talk about that.” News of her auntie's pregnancy would be news indeed. The angel's final words to Mary were about Elizabeth for sure, but they were meant for Mary: **“For nothing is impossible with God.”**

Mary's answer established her one of the great teachers of the Church for all time. **“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.**

Why Mary Matters

Why does Mary matter so much to mankind? Let's talk about that with the big picture in mind, and then let's talk about it at street level.

First, Mary matters to human life, because she was the biological bridge between two worlds. When she said, **“May it be to me as you have said,”** her body became the bridge by which God is all His mystery crossed over into our world and made Himself accessible to us as Mary's Son, Jesus. Jesus said, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”** – John 14:7. To have seen Jesus or to read the eyewitness accounts of Jesus in the gospels is to see God under human conditions.

That brings us to street level. Mary, one of the Church's great teachers, embodied obedience to God. She didn't know what to make out of what the angel said. She only knew she was to carry a son without being intimate with a man. She had no idea how that could be.

There was no time to understand. She had to respond. She could have balked. She could have hesitated. She could have stomped her feet and wept and said, “Why me?” She could have said, “I won't do it.” But she believed that **nothing is impossible with God**, and she said: **“I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.”** Mary believed and obeyed where our first mother, Eve, disbelieved and disobeyed.

What obedience does God require of you at this moment in your life? The people around you may think you are foolish to care about that. I want you to know that you are as sane as sunlight on seawater. That's when you say with Mary, **“I am the Lord's**

servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Let me give you a path you can follow as you pursue the obedience God is asking from you.

- A. Identify the obedience. What obedience do you think God requires of you at this time in your life?
- B. Declare your love. Tell Christ that you love Him, and you want to obey Him to honor Him.
- C. Share. Share the obedience you believe God requires of you at this point in your life. Share with people you can trust who will pray for you, encourage you, and hold you accountable. It may be your Sunday class, your small group, or a friend, who walks with Christ.
- D. Obey. Start obeying, one day at a time.
- E. Confess. Practice the spiritual discipline of confession when you fail – immediately after you fail.

Give Praise to God

Mary has one more gift for us. It begins in verse 46.

And Mary said:

“My soul praises the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me –

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

even as he said to our fathers.”

And you say, “She did not say that. People don’t talk like that.” But they do, if they have learned the scriptures, especially if they have learned to pray the scriptures. You would be amazed how much Mary’s prayer is like Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Old Testament language fills this prayer.

It’s one of the reasons I keep us reading scripture aloud together every Sunday. I want scriptural ideas and scriptural language to feel as natural on our lips as other habits of speech we have.

The Journey

When we read last Sunday about Zechariah’s encounter with the angel Gabriel, we asked who knew that events that have shaped human history would begin with an old

man saying his prayers alone in the temple of God? That's how God carries forward His purpose in human life. Just when you think He has forgotten, just when you think your situation is hopeless, those are moments to remember that somewhere, out of sight, God is at work preparing to bless all the nations of earth.

What He does on a grand scale, He does in miniature. He is at work in your life. The way to access what He is doing is to pray. Tell God what you want Him to do. Tell Him everyday. Be open to surprises. Get started and trust God. It's not a blank check. It is an invitation to discover how God is at work in your life and circumstances, including the impossible situations you find yourself in. And all the time pursue the obedience that God require of you at this moment in your life. You won't be the same person a year from now.

When Mary said, "**May it be to me as you have said,**" she offered her body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. You see in the two alcoves in the sanctuary and on the one wall in the Gathering Place more than 300 green cards. That's how many of us three weeks ago said that we have offered our bodies to God as living sacrifices. These cards represent a yearning to be closer to Christ, to be more like Christ. I believe many more of us who didn't fill out a card also have spiritual yearnings like that. God is waking a giant here.

Don't waste those yearnings. Feed them. Satisfy them. Pray. Obey. And when all has been said and done each day, praise God. Sing the Doxology. Read Psalm 145. Reread Mary's praise. Let prayer, scripture, and obedience fill your days this December, and this will be your finest Christmas time.