



# How Not to Talk to an Angel

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 1:26-38

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There's a division of the house with regard to Mary's place in the Christian church. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her. Protestants pretty much ignore her.

A story from history to illustrate the divide. There was bad blood between Catholics and Protestants in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. John Knox was the Protestant reformer instrumental in bringing reformation to Scotland. Knox was arrested for propagating Protestant teaching and sentenced to 19 months of hard labor as a rower on a galley ship. One day, a Catholic priest came on board and brought a painted wooden statue of Mary with him. Each sailor was expected to genuflect before the statue to show proper respect. Knox resisted: "Trouble me not; such an idol is a curse. I will not touch it." When the statue was thrust into Knox's lap, he promptly threw it overboard saying, "Let the Lady save herself...Let her learn to swim."

Not exactly a high water mark in Protestant-Catholic relations. Does Mary have a place in Protestant theology or will we, like Knox, continue to throw her overboard?

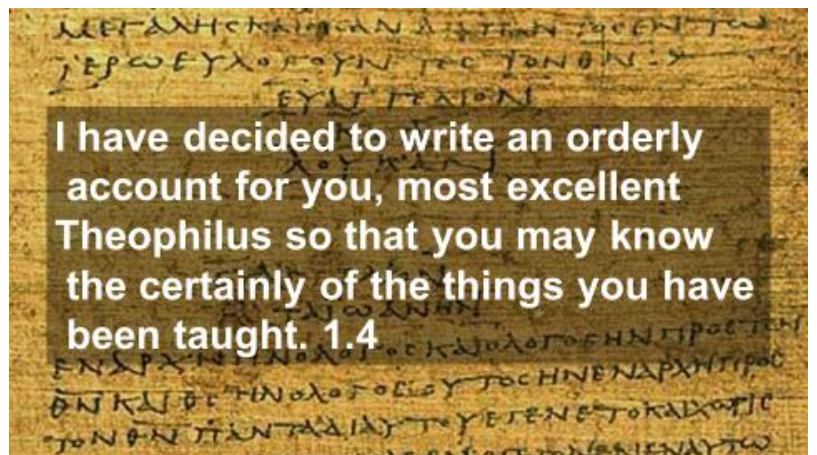


During the four Sundays of Advent, our focus is the four gospels. We want to discover the difference Jesus can make in our lives. (The picture on the screen was taken by someone from this church who saw these four Coke products in a convenience store).

On the first Sunday of Advent, we examined Matthew's gospel, which tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's point of view. Last Sunday, we looked at Mark's, which skips over Jesus' birth entirely to focus instead on Jesus' baptism as a signature event in Jesus'

ministry. Today, we come to Luke's gospel, which tells Jesus' birth story from Mary's perspective.

Luke begins with a preamble: "I decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:4). We don't know the identity of Theophilus. Perhaps he's somebody important, given Luke's salutation of "most excellent." Theophilus is likely a believer who needs more certainty about Jesus.



Luke provides us with an "orderly account." I had never noticed before this week how Luke orders these two stories to be told side by side. Luke deliberately tells the story of a son born to Zechariah and Elizabeth (5-25) alongside the story of a son born to Mary and Joseph (26-38). Luke intends these stories to be told together. Let me illustrate with a point-by-point comparison of these two stories:

#### 5-25

I am Gabriel sent by God v19  
he was troubled v12  
angel came to him v13  
do not be afraid v13  
you will have a son v13  
he will be great v15  
he asked the angel v18  
angel said to him v19

#### 26-38

God sent Gabriel v26  
she was troubled v29  
angel came to her v29  
do not be afraid v30  
you will have a son v31  
he will be great v32  
she asked the angel v34  
angel said to her v35

The elderly priest Zechariah and young Mary are both visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are troubled by the meaning of his unexpected visit. Both are told not to be afraid.



Both are informed they will have a son and both are informed he will be great. Both ask the angel a question and both receive at least a partial answer.

Both birth announcements are nothing short of miraculous. One message is delivered to an elderly priest who is married to a woman beyond child-bearing years. The other is directed to a young virgin, no less. Both have a hard time getting their heads around what this angel is telling them.

When people ask me whether I believe in the virgin birth, I fall back on something Gabriel said to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God” (1:37).



So far, these two stories are remarkably similar. Now, I want to show you how they diverge. I want you to notice how our

two lead characters put the question to Gabriel. They take a decidedly different approach to this surprise announcement. Zechariah asks, “How will I know this is so?” (1:18), while Mary asks, “How can this be?” (1:34). While the questions look similar, they are markedly different.

When Zechariah is told his post-menopausal wife will have a son, he doesn’t believe it. He wants additional proof. He asks for another sign to verify the message.

Here’s a priest, a direct descendant of Aaron, the first great priest of Israel, who doesn’t believe the angel and wants another sign. Let me see if I understand what is happening here. Zechariah goes to the most holy place on the planet on

the most important day in his priestly life and is visited by an angel. What other sign do you need, Zechariah? What other sign can I give you to help you believe?

Look at what Gabriel says in response to Zechariah's, how-can-I-know-this-is-so question. "I've been sent to speak to you and tell you the good news. And now you will be silent and unable to speak until the day this happens *because you did not believe my words*" (1:20). There you have it, folks! Zechariah will be rendered mute for his unbelief until this promise comes true in his own life.

Mary, by contrast, simply asks, "How can this be?" (1:34). What she requests is more information. She knows a "Y" chromosome is needed to make a baby. She asks if there is anything else the angel can tell her about this impossible birth.

Gabriel's response is rather cryptic: "The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:38). Okay!? In other words, God will make it happen. The aged priest wants more proof, yet this young peasant girl from an obscure village betrothed to nobody special is willing to take this messenger from God at his word.

Later, when Mary pays cousin Elizabeth a visit, Elizabeth celebrates Mary's astounding faith.

"Blessed is she *who has believed* that the Lord would fulfill his

promises to her" (1:45). The priest did not believe the announcement. The young girl did.



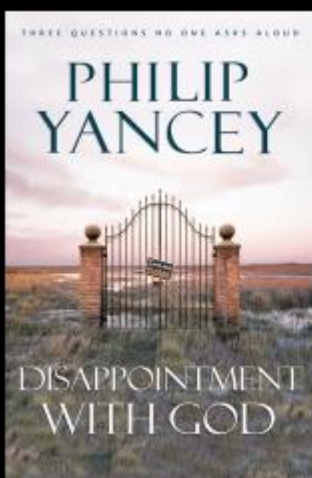
Blessed is she *who has believed* that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. 1.45

Mary is willing to trust God, even when the circumstances of her life don't make sense. She responds with one of the most extraordinary responses uttered anywhere in Scripture, "Let it be to me according to your word" (1:38).

We have come now to the so-what moment in this improbable story. Can I learn to trust God, when the circumstances in my life don't make sense? Maybe you are struggling with the *why* question right now. Why is this happening to me? Why do my prayers go unanswered? Why, God, why?

But things are not always what they seem. One reason why God doesn't explain these things to us is that we would never understand. Let's just say it's complicated.

The story of Job in the Old Testament is a case in point. Job is the guy who has it all going for him when the bottom falls out of his life. Job's friends argue with him that there must be something Job has done to deserve so much misfortune. While Job holds his ground, he asks God for some explanation. I appreciate what Frederick Buechner writes about Job in his book *Wishful Thinking*, "For God to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little neck clam." Well said! How would you explain Einstein's theory of relativity to creatures who don't know the first thing about physics and atoms?



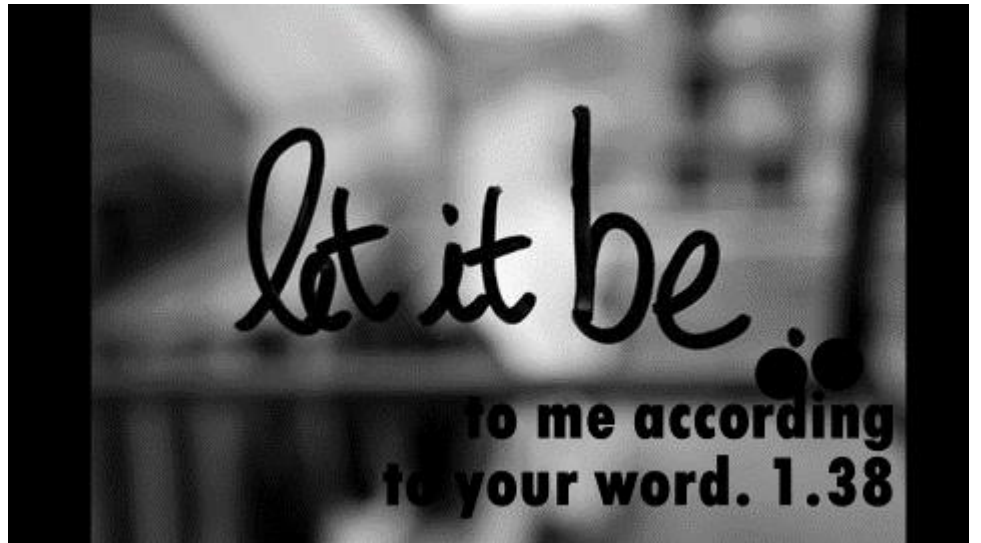
**We remain ignorant of the details, not because God enjoys keeping us in the dark but because we don't have the faculties to absorb so much light.**

Philip Yancey says it well in his book *Disappointment with God*. "We remain ignorant of many details not because



God enjoys keeping us in the dark but because we don't have the faculties to absorb so much light."

Mary's answer, "Let it be to me according to your word" epitomizes trust. That's why she has a treasured place in the Biblical story. Her moxie in



trusting God under trying circumstances is exemplary. I don't pray to Mary, nor do I venerate her but I am inspired by her faith and trust. She has already come to the place in her young life where she is willing to trust God. She believes God can be trusted.

This is also evident in the song she sings following this announcement called *The Magnificat*. She may be all of 16, but this girl certainly knows her Torah. She quotes no less than ten Old Testament passages in a span of ten verses.

Take a page from Mary's story. Learn to trust God, even when the circumstances of your life don't make sense. "I'm going to trust you God, even when life confounds me and people make no sense to me. I'm going to trust your good and gracious purposes for my life."

This sermon may seem to have a whole lot more to do about Mary than it does about Jesus. Not really. Our goal this Advent season is to discover the difference Jesus can make in our lives. Let's set the record straight: Mary can't hold a candle to Jesus. She does, however, teach us a profound lesson about trust. God offers us the amazing gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. What is asked of us is the

willingness to receive the gift. God asks us to trust the promise. Trust God by receiving Jesus. Maybe you have never trusted Jesus before with your life. Maybe you have trusted him but need to learn to trust him all over again.

When the way forward is not clear, trust God. When life confounds you, trust God and this faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Trust God. Receive Jesus.



TRUST GOD