

4th Sunday of Advent
12/24/17

How can this be? This is Mary's not unexpected response to the angel Gabriel's telling her not to be afraid, that she has found favor with God, and that she will bear a child who will be called Son of the Most High. And Mary asks, "How can this be?" In other words, she was telling the angel that she has had no intimate relations with a man, no plans to do so anytime soon and therefore no way of imagining how what the angel is saying will happen. How can this be?

We just heard the angel's reply: the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And as if to say, I know you're thinking this is impossible to believe, Gabriel tells Mary her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also expecting, in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible for God.

One author invites us to pause for a few moments and allow Mary's question to become our own: how can this be? None of us need to live in an offbeat, one-horse town like Nazareth to ask that kind of question. We live in a society that raises all kinds of "How can this be? questions.

All we need do is scan the morning paper or turn on the TV and the question comes easily. How could a train be going 80 miles per hour around a curve when the speed limit is 30? How could a young man possibly get a knife into an interrogation room? How can people continue to drive vehicles into crowds? And what about the not-so-welcome diagnosis from the doctor? Or the notice that you've lost your job? How can this be seems like a pretty logical question to ask under a lot of situations life throws our way.

The answer to Mary's "how can this be" question is found in the story. God says in utter simplicity, "I will come among you, I will empower you, bless you and be with you." That sounds fine for Mary but what about the how questions in our own lives? What are we to say and how are we to respond?

The author I referenced before suggests that the lesson reminds us that when life deals us a hand of surprising circumstances, God is with us. Gabriel didn't wish Mary good luck with her situation. On the contrary, he said God's Spirit will be with you now and always. Emmanuel, the very name used in Matthew's version of this story, means exactly that: God with us. With one voice using differing words, the Gospel says that God does not put things "on us," but rather comes "to us" and abides "with us" through every changing circumstance of our lives. No matter what shows up on any given day of any week, God never has to show up because God has never checked out.

Author Ted Wolgamot points out an unusual painting by Henry Tanner that deals with this Annunciation scene. In it, Mary is not depicted as a totally serene girl kneeling in prayer with a glowing halo. Rather, Mary is shown sitting on her disheveled bed with unkempt hair, eyes frozen as if in awe or even terror. The look on her face is that of someone both stunned and utterly confused. And why shouldn't she be?

God is asking the unimaginable of this young, uneducated girl. She is being visited by an angel – and she is being asked to do what? Her how can this be question leaves her afraid, speechless, astonished, dazed.

Like Mary, we may have no idea how we are going to work through the issue or difficulty or opportunity staring us in the face. But the One who made us in God's image is the very One who is with us in Jesus Christ our Lord. The question is asked again: how can this be? and the answer is simple: how can this NOT be when we yield our wills to His will and our lives to His life. Doing that, hard as it may sometimes be, will bring about a very merry Christmas indeed.