

## The Story of the Annunciation

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Hi everybody. I'm Scott Powell. And today I want to talk a little bit about the story of the Annunciation. This huge moment where young Virgin Mary, as the angel Gabriel appeared to her and tells her that her life is about to utterly and completely change. And through her life change, the world will change. So, I want to dive into the story but first let's open in a prayer.

### Opening Prayer

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Jesus, we come to You today with praise and thanksgiving. We thank You for the gift of this retreat. We thank You for all of the retreat and some participants, all over the world. We pray that You would help us all to enter into this Lenten season. That we may prepare to understand Your passion to enter into Your passion with You, to accompany You, and then to understand Your Easter resurrection. We pray that we may live in the light of these things. We pray that You would help us understand the story of Mary, to understand what the Annunciation means in our lives, what it meant to her life, and what we can do with those things.*

*We pray for the intercession of Mary, as we pray together, Hail Mary full of grace. The Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary mother of God pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Name of the Father and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

### The Gospel of Luke

I began with the Hail Mary prayer, which not coincidentally actually comes from the story that I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the Gospel of Luke a little bit. I love the Gospel of Luke. And one of the things I love about the Gospel of Luke, is that Luke, you might say is the most Christmassy of all the Gospels. I know this is a Lenten retreat, but we get a lot of the stories of Advent, of the preparation for Jesus's birth. And then the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Matthew gives us a number of them as well.

But what's neat about Luke is that Luke gives us the insight, into the particularly Marian moments of Jesus is coming into the world. The deep insight and what's going on in Mary's heart. What's going on inside Mary's interior life as the angel is appearing to her. When she goes and visits her cousin Elizabeth. All of these wonderful moments that set us up for the incarnation.

It's been speculated as to why that actually is, but one of the things that we know and I'm not entirely sure, but I have a theory on this. One of the things that we know from the tradition, is that both Mary and Luke were believed to have lived in the city of Ephesus, at least toward the end of Mary's earthly life before her Annunciation. And if that's true that Luke and Mary actually

were perhaps in the same parish in the same town, I wonder if they might have gained a relationship with each other. I have this image that's totally imaginative. But thinking of St. Luke, on a rocking chair on the porch with Mary, in Ephesus as she's telling him the stories about, all of what she was feeling and what was happening when the angel appeared to her and when she visited her cousin, and all of these wonderful stories. Which is why Luke then has all of these beautiful, deep insights that really would've been known to Mary alone. Because maybe she let him in on these things.

## **Two Announcements**

One of the things that she lets him in on or seems to, is the story of the Annunciation. Which comes right at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. It's right at the beginning and it's where we get a lot of the lines from the Our Father prayer. The first part of the, Our Father prayer is given to us from the angel Gabriel, and then her cousin Elizabeth when she goes and does the visitation. But the Annunciation is interesting to me for a lot of different reasons. One of which is that in the Gospel of Luke, it's actually not the first Annunciation so to speak. It is the Annunciation with a capital A, but there was an announcement made prior to this.

So, the Gospel of Luke actually begins, not with Mary but with a guy named Zechariah, who is Elizabeth Mary's cousin's husband. And it begins with Zechariah in the temple in Jerusalem serving as a priest, offering the incense which was the prayers on behalf of the people of Israel, outside of the Holy of Holies. And an angel Gabriel appears to him and says that everything that Israel has been praying for and hoping for and longing for, for so many years is now coming to fruition. Now is the moment that God is going to move and work in human history to set things right. And he says to Zechariah, your son is going to be a part of this mission that is going to happen in the world. That's going to change everything.

After that we get another Annunciation. Not to a priest, not in Jerusalem, not on the temple, not to some learned, educated, prominent person in society, but to Mary. Who is probably of the peasant class. Who is in a back woods, not terribly significant in town. Who's probably a young teenage girl. Didn't hold a huge high standing in society. But I love the juxtaposition of these two things because that's how God loves to work. God loves Zechariah. God loves John the Baptist and God wanted to use their story. But their story is the secondary one. That announcement is the lesser of the announcements.

The big announcement, the Annunciation with the capital A, comes to the peasant girl in Nazareth, in the middle of nowhere, who was a teenage girl. Probably not thought of in a tremendous way by the rest of society, but that's how God loves to work. God loves to flip our expectations on their head. It's said that if God is truly King, nothing in our lives, nothing in your life, nothing in the world needs to remain the way it is. God can fill the lowly with good things and send the rich away empty. God can turn the tables of the way our life seems. The inevitability of the things in our life and the stories that we carry.

This is in a certain sense the story of Mary, but I want to delve a little bit deeper into it. Because Mary's greatness doesn't simply lie in her being a conduit, being an incubator for the son of God.

That's a big deal that she actually gives birth that she bears the Messiah in her womb. But I also want to talk about her yes. What's called her Fiat.

## Mary's Fiat

So, as we meet Mary in the Gospel of Luke. It's in chapter one, verse 26. It says, "In the sixth month," that is of Elizabeth pregnancy. "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth. To a woman betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the House of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and he said, 'Hail full of grace.'" This is where we get the first line of the Hail Mary prayer. "'Hail full of grace the Lord is with you.' But she was greatly troubled at the saying and she considered in her mind, what sort of greeting this might be." When it says that Mary was greatly troubled, it might be the understatement of the Bible.

It's whenever you see the phrase, "The Lord is with you" in the Bible. Usually in the Old Testament. It tends to come when God is going to ask someone to do something incredibly difficult. That's going to get them mistreated or hated or looked down upon, or put them in a great deal of danger from the people around us. When Moses is called to go before Pharaoh, God says, "Don't worry the Lord is with you." When Elijah has to speak before a pagan king, says "The Lord is with you." When Jeremiah has to go and call out the corruption in Jerusalem at the temple it says, "The Lord will be with you." So, I bet when Mary who is probably well formed in the scriptural story, when she hears the words "The Lord is with you." I wonder if her first response was uh-oh! what is that going to mean? What is going on here? So, he says, "The Lord is with you" and she is rightly troubled. And the angel says, "Don't be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God and behold, you are going to conceive in your womb and a bear son, and you will call his name Jesus." And it goes on to describe, how great Jesus will be. He'll be the Son of the Most High, the throne of His father David, will be given to Him. He'll reign, His kingdom will be unending. And all of these wonderful things.

And Mary of course responds by saying, "How can this be? 'Cause I have no husband." How is this possible? Mary, if you remember the story was betrothed at this point to Joseph. But they weren't married yet. And betrothal was different than engagement. It wasn't just that they were sort of engaged to be married. Betrothal actually to correct what I just said a second ago. Betrothal was step one in sort of the two step Jewish process of marriage. Betrothal meant you were formally married, but you had not come together as man and wife yet under the same roof, in that sense.

So, everybody knew this. And what Mary is saying yes to. So, she goes on, the angel describes that "The Holy Spirit is going to come upon you. The Most High will overshadow you and the child to be born to you will be called Holy." And Mary says, "Be it done unto me according to your word." Be it done unto me according to your word. And then it says, "The angel departed from her." Which is a line that kind of haunts me. Because Mary is then left with something monumental that is going to change everybody's life forever.

## **Saying Yes to Something Brutal**

But what Mary is saying yes to is more than, oh, I bet people are going to give me mean looks, oh, I bet this is going to be very uncomfortable. Oh, this could get a little bit embarrassing. What Mary is saying yes to. When Mary says, "Be it done unto me according to your word," what she's saying yes to is what seems like an inevitability. If a woman is found to be pregnant before she has come together with her husband, there's big consequences. There are dire consequences. And what that meant for the woman is that she would be stoned. Which meant that she would face and undergo one of the most brutal, painful, horrifying deaths a person could possibly face. The shame of the entire village, the entire city, taking part in putting a person usually a young girl, to death for this active sin. This active impropriety. That's what Mary is saying yes to.

And what she's saying yes to is probably the understanding that I've seen this happen before. I've seen women be put to death this way. I've seen stonings. I've seen not just the shame, not just the discomfort, not just the dirty looks from people, but I've seen women put to death and be stoned. Buried in the ground and rocks pelt them until they're dead. I've seen women undergo this. I'm not trying to sound explicit. I'm not trying to sound like I'm over the top, but I think it's important for us to begin to wrap our brains around what it is that Mary is saying yes to. I can't imagine that Mary saw an alternative to this. Mary said this is what happens, to people who find themselves pregnant out of wedlock. This is what happens to women who find themselves pregnant during betrothal, before the husband and the wife have come together. I know what this means. I know what the consequences are. However, I know my God is bigger than this. And I know the God that I believe in is the God of Moses, the God of Elijah, the God of Jeremiah, the God who said, "I will be with you," and did the unthinkable and the unbelievable, the unimaginable, through impossible circumstances.

## **Joseph as Protector**

Mary's yes, Mary's Fiat. Mary's be it done unto me according to thy word, is an act of profound trust. Saying God I know where this road leads. And although I don't have the eyes to see it, I know that you have a different road. I know that you have a plan that's greater than this. This is I think in a very real way, where Joseph then enters the story as protector. Joseph is protector of the Holy Family by virtue of being father, and by virtue of being husband. But a very particular way. So we read a little bit about Joseph's story in the Gospel of Matthew.

And we find out that Joseph, once he hears what's going on gets a little freaked out. And it says in Matthew that he wants to divorce Mary quietly. Divorce her because this marriage is formal. They are betrothed. It is first step of marriage. And so there would be a formality in actually extricating himself from it. But the angel appears to Joseph as well and says, "No, it's okay. Don't be afraid." I wonder if Joseph realized, I don't tend to think that Joseph thinks Mary has cheated on him. I don't tend to think that Joseph assumes that Mary was unfaithful. I tend to believe, and we have to guess. But I tend to believe that Joseph knows Mary well enough, to know that she couldn't possibly have done that. She couldn't possibly have been unfaithful. I wonder if God is doing something here that is so far beyond me. That I can't possibly be a part of it. I'm not holy enough. I don't have the capacity to be a part of whatever God's plan is here.

To which the angel has to come to Joseph and say, "No, it's okay man. God has called you to be a part of this as well." Which rallies Joseph to do what? To protect. Because it's now on Joseph to make sure that she doesn't get stoned. To make sure that her life is preserved so that she can give birth to the Messiah, and He can grow up and He can save the world. This is I think, part of why Mary then flees to go and be with Elizabeth, to take refuge. And I believe that Joseph was there holding down the fort, being protector, having Mary's back, watching out for whatever would come.

## **Sharing Jesus' Passion**

But I find it really haunting reflection what this meant both for Mary and of course for Joseph as well, when that moment came that Mary made her profound act faith and said, "Yeah, I believe. And be it done unto me according to your word." I believe that you will have my back Lord. I believe that you will protect me. I believe that this is your will. But then the angel departs and there is silence. I don't know what Mary's prayer was like during that time. I don't know what Joseph's prayer was like during that time.

But I imagine that there was a certain amount of silence. There was a certain amount of quiet. There was a certain amount of dryness perhaps, as the angel departs and Mary and Joseph, Mary in a very particular way, are left with this reality. Are left in the moment that we all experience to greater or lesser degrees, where we believe, and we're trying to move forward in faith, but we don't hear the voice of God very clearly anymore. We don't see Him directly in front of us. We don't see those lightning bolts or those voices from heaven saying, "Yeah, you're good. Keep on going. You're on the right track." Maybe Mary did have those things, but there is a hauntingness of those words the angel departed her. She had Elizabeth. I know she had Joseph, but she's left in the moment of, I think and I wonder, sharing in a real way, in her son's passion. When Jesus is left on the cross not abandoned by His Father but left by His friends. And left by those many of whom who are closest to Him. And left to undergo the suffering on the cross.

Mary experiences that at the foot of the cross with Jesus, but she also experiences it gears earlier, where she has to go on a kind of very dark retreat, where she is left with her yes. She is left with the seeming inevitability of what she said yes to, but the knowledge I trust, I hope, I believe, that God will get me out of this. God has a greater way.

You guys, what are the things in your life that just seem inevitable? What are the things that God has placed before you? what are the barricades, the fears, the baggage that you're carrying with you, the obstacles in your life that just seem unovercomeable. Inevitable. No way out. Are we willing to turn those things over to God, to say "Be it done unto to me according to your word." I know what this seems like. And if suffering is your will Lord then I'll receive the suffering. But I want to enter into it with You.

Be it done unto to me according to your word. Mary believes in the impossible. Because she has a God who is really a big fan, of flipping the state of the world on its head. Of casting down the mighty from their thrones and of lifting up the lowly. If we truly live in a world in which God is sovereign, nothing in your life, nothing in my life, nothing in the world needs to remain inevitable. Thanks you guys.