

Mary

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Luke 1:26-38 NIV

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."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "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."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

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. 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. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Revelation 12:1-12 NIV

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (Revelation 12:1).

Preaching from the Book of Revelation is risky business. There are so many different ways of looking at this fascinating, colorful and dramatic book. Some interpreters think the Revelation to John is a prediction of things still to come, a blueprint for the scenario of "end-time" events. Others see it as a dramatic interpretation of the life and death of Jesus Christ — a kind of re-symbolizing of the story we read in the Gospels. Still others believe the Revelation symbolically portrays things that were happening later in the first century, when John received his vision from Jesus Christ. As you may have guessed, I tend toward that third view. But, like many parts of the Bible, the Revelation can be looked at from a number of angles with great profit to our Christian walk and our understanding of God's purpose.

It's not a good idea, then, to be dogmatic about one's own particular interpretation of the Revelation to John, because *God is full of surprises*. As Paul said, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). When even the most highly trained theological experts stand before the face of their Maker, it's likely they'll all find out they were wrong about something in the Book of Revelation. The Lord has made many things quite plain to us, but there are other things that remain mysteries. As Moses says in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are

revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” God tells us *what we need to do* to be faithful to his calling and his covenant, but he doesn’t always explain a lot about himself or what goes on in his own mind. As Paul, again, asks, “Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (Romans 11:34). We can’t be as cocky about it as the little old Scottish lady who started learning Hebrew in her nineties, because, she said, “When I meet the Lord I don’t want to have to speak through an interpreter.”

So when we take on the Book of Revelation it’s wise to remember that it belongs in that category of “the secret things that belong to the Lord our God,” to which Moses referred. That’s especially true for us who live in the twenty-first century, in a different culture from the people who first heard those ancient words. We have another way of looking at things, a way conditioned by our scientific and technological world view. That means some things are *lost to us* that were probably quite clear to the people in the seven churches to whom John sent his letter, the Revelation that Jesus had given him. Those folks probably had the key to understanding what the book meant, but almost two millennia later we’ve lost that key. In fact, I think it was lost very early on in the history of the church, so people began to devise their own keys to fit the conditions of their own times, and that process is still going on.

Yes, it’s risky business to take on the Book of Revelation. But, as they say, “Fools rush in,” and today we’re going to have a go at the passage that was read to us from Revelation 12 — the passage about the woman that gives birth to the child who is taken up to the throne of God. If we can say anything dogmatic about the Book of Revelation, we can say that it’s a story full of dramatic and vivid word-pictures. And when we read Revelation 12 along with the account of Mary the mother of Jesus, in Luke 1, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that there’s some connection between these two very different parts of the New Testament. So let’s look at these two passages together and see what we come up with.

Let’s begin with Luke. Elizabeth, Mary’s relative, had miraculously become pregnant in her old age — just like Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Elizabeth’s baby would be John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ. And in her sixth month the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a teen-age girl from Nazareth, with an astounding message: She’s to become the mother of the Son of God, the Messiah for whom the Israelites have been hoping all these centuries!

Now picture this scene, if you will, as it was dramatized last week in our children’s pageant. Here’s this little Jewish girl called Miriam (that’s Mary in Hebrew), just puttering around her mother’s kitchen — because she isn’t even married yet, she and Joseph are only betrothed — and perhaps stirring up dough for a loaf of bread, as Elyse was doing last week. She’s just minding her own business, not expecting any great happening today because nothing much ever happens here in Galilee. And certainly Miriam’s not expecting any important visitors. But now comes this *angel Gabriel*, a messenger of God, and says, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

I have to ask you, folks, how would you react if this happened to you? I suppose there might be times when we’d be really glad if an angel showed up. Imagine, ladies, you’ve gone to visit a friend and you’re driving home alone on a dark, rainy night on an unfamiliar road and *BLAM!* there goes a tire. You work the car over to the shoulder and stop, and fumble around in your purse for the cell phone. At last you find it, and — “Rats, the battery’s down! What do I do now?” I bet you that’s one time you’d be thrilled to meet an angel.

But suppose we’re safe at home and just going about our usual routine, and suddenly an angel shows up and says, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” We might have one of two reactions — after we get over our shock. We might say, “Well, it’s about time I got the recognition I deserve. It’s about time God put his stamp of approval on me, after all I’ve done for him.” Or we might have a quite different response: “Uh oh, this could be trouble. God wants me to do something. Something big. I mean, it’s great to be a Christian, but if God’s picked *me* out for a special mission — I don’t know about that!”

Mary didn’t have either of these reactions. In fact, Luke says she “was greatly troubled at his words and *wondered* what kind of greeting this might be.” When God gets ready to tell you something it’s a good idea not to decide in advance what he’s supposed to say. So Mary waits, and wonders.

The angel continues. “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.”

Fade out from Luke’s scene, set in earthly Nazareth. Fade in with John’s scene, set in *heaven!* Well, I think it’s the same scene, as viewed from the perspective of God’s long-range plan. “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth” (Revelation 12:1-2). Reading further, we learn that the woman gives birth to a son who will rule the world, and be taken up to the throne of God — just as Gabriel told Mary that her child would be “the Son of the Most High” who would rule over Israel in a reign that would never end.

But who is this mysterious woman, “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head”? Does this ring a bell? Do you remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament, and the dream he described to his brothers: “Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (Genesis 37:9) — obviously, a reference to his father Jacob and his wife, and their sons, the house of Israel with its tribes. Now we see Mary, described in the same way. So, who is she? Yes, on one level she’s that humble peasant girl from Nazareth who, one day, received an angel from the Lord. But viewed from another angle she becomes all Israel, the people God chose to bear his name and bless all peoples of the earth. Or rather, she becomes the *faithful* Israel through whom the Lord continues to work, even though its leaders have turned aside from God’s true calling. And out of this faithful Israel will come the One who is to rule on the throne of David — God’s Messiah.

The curtain comes down on the heavenly stage and rises again on the scene in Nazareth. The angel has just told Mary what is to happen to her. “How can this be?” she asks. “I’m not married yet.” Gabriel has an answer. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” he declares, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. . . . For nothing is impossible with God.”

That’s good enough for Mary. “I am the Lord’s servant,” she replies. “May it be to me as you have said.” I like the older translation better; it has such a “ring” to it: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” None of this “Uh oh, God wants me to do something difficult . . . maybe you could pick someone else?” Humble Miriam, the young mother of our Lord Jesus, has become for us the paradigm of God’s willing servant, ready to answer his call to some special task even though it might cost her greatly.

Could Miriam even begin to imagine, in that moment, what it would cost her? Perhaps she began to get an inkling of it when she and Joseph took the baby Jesus up to Jerusalem to be presented in the Temple, and she heard old Simeon’s word to her: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). Yes, it would cost young Miriam a lot to be the mother of the Christ; traditional Catholic piety recognizes the “Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary,” the greatest and last being when the body of her son was laid in his tomb. But could she anticipate what difficulties lay ahead for her when she uttered these simple words? “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Nevertheless, she *said* them. And, whether or not we understand all that may lie ahead for us when we answer the Lord’s call to serve him, we may still respond as Mary did, knowing that “nothing is impossible with God.”

The screen fades over to heaven once more, and we see a picture of what lies ahead for the woman and her child. “Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born” (Revelation 12:3-4). Seven heads, ten horns, seven crowns — interpreters have tried to link these with successive Roman rulers, or even with various Jewish authorities, all viewed as the instruments of the dragon, “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Revelation 12:9). To all evil and earthly authorities the son of this woman is a threat, for his righteous and peaceable way will destroy their power in the end.

But why is this dragon *red*? The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the first of these evil authorities who feared the birth of this child was King Herod. Herod was an Idumean, or Edomite, whose family had been

converted to Judaism. The name *Edom* is the Hebrew word for the color red. It was this *red dragon*, King Herod, who slaughtered the innocent children of Bethlehem, thinking to rid himself of a rival to his throne. As John says, “The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.” Well, that’s a theory that may or may not have something going for it. The dragon and his minions take many forms in their unceasing, but futile, effort to destroy the Son of God. We see the dragon at work today — in our media, our schools, our politics, our courts — doing all he can to stamp out the Christian faith and the testimony of Jesus. And the witness of the Book of Revelation, and that of all Scripture, is that he will never succeed, for “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). The dragon will not prevail, says our heavenly drama, even though “he is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.”

Flash back to Bethlehem, where the “red dragon,” Herod, tries to destroy Jesus, the newborn King. He fails, for Jesus is to die another way — on the cross, giving his life as a ransom for many. Jesus grows up in Nazareth, begins to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick, confronts the false leaders of his community with their hypocrisy, and fulfills his calling as the Servant of the Lord by laying down his life in Jerusalem — only to be raised again from the dead and taken up to heaven, vindicated as “both Lord and Christ,” the Messiah of God in whom is eternal life.

Viewed from the perspective of heaven, this all happens immediately, for it was God’s plan from the beginning. The Revelation covers it in just one verse about the woman: “She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne” (Revelation 12:5). Why does John do this? Because, if you read the Gospel of John, you hear Jesus say, “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:31-32). He’s speaking of his *crucifixion*, but his “lifting up” on the cross is also his “lifting up” in *resurrection triumph* over the evil authorities of the world. For John, it’s as though the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are one and the same. Early Christian theologians sometimes spoke of the crucifixion as a trick God played on the devil, to make him think he had won the battle — when, in fact, he had lost the battle when the Son of God was “lifted up” on the cross, and the woman’s child “was snatched up to God and to his throne.” In the cross *the deceiver was deceived*.

So now the dragon knows his time is short, and in his fury he makes things as tough as possible for the woman. As a result, the Revelation tells us, “The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.” What does *this* mean? Remember, I suggested that this woman, in the Book of Revelation, isn’t just Miriam, the peasant girl from Nazareth. She’s a picture of God’s faithful Israel, those who respond to the gospel of the kingdom of God. And, for John and the other apostles, that faithful Israel is none other than the Christian church, those who believe in Messiah Jesus. When the Jews revolted against Rome in the latter part of the first century, and the Roman armies laid siege to Jerusalem, the Christians fled the city and took refuge in the wilderness east of the River Jordan — exactly as Jesus had warned them to do: “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Luke 21:20-21).

I don’t have time to go into the other details of this passage — and if I did there’s no guarantee I would come close to the truth. But what about those 1,260 days, during which there is warfare in heaven, after which the dragon is hurled back to the earth to make war on the saints? I think John is showing us an overlapping kaleidoscope of Gospel events. 1,260 days are about three and one-half years, approximately the length of Jesus’ earthly ministry between his temptation in the wilderness and his death on the cross. At the beginning of his ministry, the devil tries to lure Jesus away from his God-given mission, but he fails. So, as Luke 4:13 tells us, “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.” But then, just before the crucifixion, he shows up again, in Luke 22:2-3: “And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put [Jesus] to death; for they feared the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot . . .” It’s possible that in Revelation 12 we have another picture of the spiritual warfare that went on during Jesus’ ministry. It’s a warfare that continues today, and for which we need to be equipped with the armor of God. But the outcome is never in doubt as the people of

God engage this dragon enemy, the “accuser of the brethren.” John hears a voice from heaven proclaiming our victory: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.”

We’re creatures of earth, and we see things from an earthly perspective. From the human standpoint the story of Mary touches our hearts. Once upon a time, in the village of Nazareth, an unpretentious young woman received a visit from an angel of God. And when she learned she was to be the mother of the Son of God, her response of faith was simple and clear: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” The earthly story of the Christ begins with her willing and humble response to the call of God. But, as we have seen in our passage from the Revelation to John, this isn’t just an earthly story. It’s a heavenly one involving a battle between a loving God and an evil adversary — a struggle between Christ and his faithful people on one hand, and on the other, those in bondage to crafty authorities who want to undo the work of God. We’re part of both stories, the earthly and the heavenly. And as we face the dragon, the enemy of our souls, we stand with Mary, who heard the angel’s promise: “Nothing is impossible with God.”

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