

13. She's 13 years old. Just a kid. A poor kid. Living in a harsh land. Her father's arranged a marriage for her. Some guy named Joseph, whom she'd probably never met before they were engaged. But, like it or not, she's betrothed to him now. In a binding legal contract. Back then, engagements were about a year long. So she still lives at home with her parents, until the wedding day. She is of course, still a virgin. Anything else would be unthinkable. And illegal. She's heard this Joseph is a good man. Kind. That's good. Since he'll be the one controlling their lives from now on. So things are okay, for this girl, Mary. As good as they can be for a poor girl of her time and in her culture. I'll bet she was even starting to dream about the future. Starting to make plans for her wedding, and her marriage. Gathering her dreams and wishes and expectations, and tucking them all away in her hope chest. Things were going as planned. Until... *An angel shows up!* Now, let's be clear. Forget what you've seen on Christmas cards. Angels are not cute and they're not cuddly. They're not big chubby babies with teeny little gravity-defying wings. At least not the angels we find in the bible. Especially archangels. They're powerful warriors. With the force of God in their flashing eyes and mighty arms. They bring justice. The words of God thunder from their mouths. Michael wields a flaming sword. Raphael binds a raging demon and casts him into the outer darkness. Gabriel's own name means the 'strength of God.' Yeah, Mary received quite a visitor that day. And what a message he had to tell.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

I'm gonna what?!? Name him who?!? Hello... virgin! Yeah, this message from the angel—this *annunciation*... Not necessarily the best news for a betrothed teen virgin to hear. Probably not the easiest news to them tell her parents. And not so easy to break to Joseph. *Uh, Honey... I'm, ah, gonna have a baby. But I swear, I swear... It's God's baby...* Yeah, we can laugh a little. We can imagine this scene played out on a Christmas sitcom. But in reality, this a downright dangerous. If she tells Joseph the truth. And he doesn't believe her (and who could?). He could call her out as an adulterer. An offense that could be punished by death. Mary could have been dragged out to the edge of town, thrown into a pit, and great stones hurled down on her, until she was dead.

The angel said, 'you will bear a son':

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Wait, is he talking about the Messiah? About a great king who will lead a mighty army? And throw off the yoke of our nation's oppressors? Who will usurp the corrupt Jewish government—the harsh rule of the Herods? If the angel's talking Messiah, he's talking politics. 1st century, middle east politics. Where opponents don't debate. They murder each other.

Poor Mary. She's got to be overwhelmed... What the heck did I get caught up in the middle of here? Imagine what must be going through her head right now. Standing there with an angel of God. Knowing that his words could be deadly. Knowing that even if all goes well—Even if she gives birth to the greatest king the world's ever seen— Still... Everything has changed. Everything she thought she knew, upended. Every dream and

wish and expectation in her hope chest just shaken out and scattered to the winds. Well, one thing this story makes clear: when God breaks in to our world, when God makes his presence known in our lives... It's not always convenient. Quite often, *God's* plans, are not *our* plans. Now, it's unlikely that any of us will be challenged in quite the same way Mary was. Unlikely that we'll be called to risk our lives for God. Or be endangered by our faith. But God does step into our lives, and stirs things up. The Holy Spirit comes to us in all kinds of ways, nudging us in God's direction. Pushing us make godly choices. To act on behalf of the gospel. To say and do things that will spread God's message of hope and salvation in Christ. God throws stuff in front of us all the time. Opportunities to give and to serve and to speak out. God challenges us to take on ministries here in the church. Or out in the world. We are all called to make godly choices every day. About our vocations, and our families, and our money, and our bodies, and our relationships. Sometimes they're small decisions. Sometimes they're much bigger, and much harder. Sometimes choosing what God wants is just plain inconvenient—*Oh, but that's not what I want*. And sometimes choosing what God wants is downright scary, overwhelming, and filled with uncertainty. *What's going to happen here? How am I gonna pull **this** off? Is this even possible?* Of course, sometimes we don't even get a choice. Sometimes God steps in and changes our lives so radically, in ways we never saw coming. And all we can do is respond to whatever comes. Mary didn't really have a choice about getting pregnant. The angel said, God will do this. But Mary's not just a prop. She's a living, breathing, thinking, feeling woman. And she did have a choice how to respond to God working her life. She could have fought God's will. Could have tried to circumvent God's plans. Scary thought, but she could have tried to end that pregnancy, and never tell anyone about it. But she didn't. She said:

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

Mary's name in Hebrew is *Mariam*. It comes from the root word *marar*—a word that can mean two things: bitterness and strength. God's will *can* seem a bitter thing at times, full of sacrifice. It couldn't have been easy facing what Mary did, so young. So the strength part is pretty easy to see there: *Here I am, Lord*. What strength she must have had to make that response. That response of perfect trust and obedience. Hers is the ideal response to God's call. I doubt many of us could answer that way.

A number of years ago, the Lord did not send a bright angel to me. But somehow I got the message that God thought it'd be a good idea for me to do this. To toss aside my carefully-crafted life plans, and become a full time, 24-7, minister of Word and Sacrament. I can tell you, that my initial response was not *Here I am, Lord... Let it be with me according to your word*. It was more sort of like... *Are you out of your divine mind?—Here I am so not!*. There aren't too many Marys among us. Because it's hard to put God's will first; before our desires and plans. It's hard to trust that God's gonna be there for us no matter what, to guide and protect and love and prosper us. It's hard to let go and trust that God's gonna make it all work out. It's hard to believe in what just seems impossible.

You will bear a son, the angel said... He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High... and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be?'

And he said... Nothing will be impossible with God.

It is in the craziest, most unlikely places, that the God's power—the power of love and salvation—comes shining through. Through a poor, unknown, teenager in the middle of a harsh desert wasteland... *God came into our world*. Through Mary's small, faithful

whisper, *Here I am, Lord...* God set in motion the redemption of all humanity. Nothing is impossible with God. If we open ourselves, heart and mind to God's will—if we let God lead the way—the glory and the wonder, the power of God's presence...it *will* be revealed in us and all around us. And it will shine through us.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.