

## Born In Perplexity<sup>1</sup>

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In today's Lection from Luke's Gospel, we read an extraordinary dialogue between Mary and an angel. It begins: "*Greetings, Favored One! The Lord is with you!*" And it continues, "*But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*" (1:29) I'm sure she was "much perplexed." Merriam-Webster defines perplexed as "Filled with uncertainty. Puzzled."

Mary doesn't go on to say, "Oh, yes. And now I understand everything!" The Gospel never downplays Luke's assertion that Mary is perplexed, or that Christ's conception is downright confusing, especially to his mother.

Perplexed. As one who spends much of my life in that same state, I take comfort. I see this passage as a great choral anthem in honor of those of us who move forward not in clarity, not in certainty, not in single-mindedness, but with perplexity. We're the ones at the back of the choir, hoping we're on the right page, and singing on pitch; but singing with gusto, nonetheless.

But we live in a society that favors decisiveness over perplexity. You're supposed to know what you want and act on it. There's no room for uncertainty. It's considered weak.

To which I would offer this gentle correction: If the mother of God got to be perplexed, you can be, too. In fact, let's take perplexity out of the old broom closet, dust it off, shine it up, and put it out on the mantel in the middle of the ecclesiological living room, because a little perplexity can be a wonderful thing in the life of faith. It's the people who ask the questions who get the answers.

But, let's continue Mary's story: at the end of her conversation with the angel, young Mary, probably around 16 years old, sounds almost unemotional in her response. She has been told that she will give birth to the Son of God, she almost is matter-of fact about offering herself up in service to the Lord. Her response is, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

The angel tells Mary that her older cousin, Elizabeth, also is pregnant—six months' pregnant. So she goes to visit Elizabeth. Luke is not clear about the details of the visit—did this young teenage girl just skip off to cousin Elizabeth's house, or was she sent away by her parents? I suspect the latter:

Mary; a poor teenager from a small town; pregnant and unwed, in a culture in which such a situation *could* be grounds for the death penalty. So, Mary is packed off to a cousin in another town—an old woman—married to an old preacher. Imagine her expectations: suffocating supervision; strict curfews; daily lectures on morality—lectures spiced with clever, original expressions like, "...you reap what you sew."

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel, Lillian. *When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (pp. 155-157). FaithWords. Kindle Edition. My introduction is adapted from this chapter.

"...when you give a dance you gotta' pay the band."

But, to her amazement, none of that happens! Instead of a dowdy old grump, cousin Elizabeth laughs, and claps her hands—and has a girlish twinkle in her eyes that contradicts the wrinkles that surround them. Instead of a cold slap on the wrist she greets Mary with warm embraces! Instead of lectures about moral responsibility, there is joy over Mary's pregnancy. Turns out, Elizabeth also had an angel visitor.

Had the angel been just a dream—a hallucination born out of intense Jewish longing for freedom and wholeness after six centuries of hoping and waiting—600 Passovers without fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah?

But here is confirmation: another whom Mary honors and respects has received the same word: "The Redeemer is near!" And Mary not only will see it; she actually will give birth to Messiah! And so, Mary says,

Luke 1:46b-55 (NRSV) "My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

It's called "The Magnificat." It's a part of Holy Scripture; Bach set it to music; Botticelli portrayed it in oil on canvas; and it's made its way into the annual liturgies of the church. It is recognized as one of the greatest expressions of joy in the Bible. And yet, it emerges out of a story—an event—Luke says was perplexing to the one who now sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

The movement from perplexity to doxology is a journey through surging emotions. Luke shares two important landmarks along the way, and both have to do with her older cousin, Elizabeth:

First, Mary questions the announcement from the angel that she's going to have a baby, even though she's a virgin, but the angel assures her that "Nothing is impossible with God," and to make his point, he tells her about, Elizabeth, who also is pregnant, even though she long since passed through menopause.

It is after that reassurance that Mary accepts her own calling, and we hear no more about her perplexity. There is sense of calm acceptance in her response: "Here am I; the servant of the Lord. May it be with me according to your word."

But the expression of joy doesn't come until she walks into Elizabeth's living room and, without even sharing her own news, is affirmed in unmistakably clear words: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

First, there is perplexity; then, surrender and acceptance; then, validation and, finally, joy. And both acceptance and validation come, not from the angel's news, but from another human.

On October 13, 1870, a boy was born to an unwed mother in Newport, Tennessee. He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same question, 'Hey boy, who's your daddy?'

He would hide at recess and lunch time. He avoided stores because that question hurt him so bad. When he was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church. He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?'. But one day, the new preacher said the benediction so fast he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd.

Just about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, "Son, who's your daddy?" The whole church got deathly quiet. He could feel every eye in the church looking at him. Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question. But this new preacher sensed the situation, and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit can give, said to that scared little boy:

"Wait a minute!" he said. "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You're a child of God!" Then he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, "Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it."

The boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person. He was never the same again.

The Boy's name was Ben Hooper, and he served two terms as Governor of Tennessee, from 1911-1915.

Never underestimate the power of your personal affirmation. Someone in your life today needs a reminder that he or she is one of God's children!