

How Can This Be?

I'm expecting????

- Recounting a bit about Howard & Phyllis' experience in discovering that they were going to be the parents of twins.
- Martin & Anita = Ben's surprising beginnings
- Words which can bring great joy...profound anxiety...often time a mixture of each.
- Recognition of the heartache of infertility – long ago, as well as today.
- Retelling the experience of Elizabeth & Zechariah – and others longing for a baby..
 - Abraham & Sara
 - Isaac & Rebecca (Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren.)
 - Jacob & Rachel(Rachel was barren)
 - Elizabeth, the one said to be barren, now well-advanced in years and her old husband, Zechariah...
- But now...a young woman, a young woman – unmarried - is given the news that she's expecting! Again, the improbabilities loom large, again the future of the people is at risk! For...

He came to her...the angel Gabriel, that is...just like he had appeared to old, gray Zechariah. Zechariah - simply tending to his priestly duties when suddenly an angel was seen standing at the right side of the altar of incense – the angel came... stirring around in an old and ancient wound, the wound of barrenness, of having arrived in late life with no further hope for the security and delight of offspring. The angel came... promising crazy things – like the answer to a prayer – no longer uttered, like the promise of a child...a child with a real life and a real name, a son for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Gabriel, this particular angel, who upon hearing Zechariah's snorts of disbelief, stepped out of the tempering cloud of incense to reveal the golden, glowing fullness of one who stands in eternal time in the presence of God, entered human time...for...

It was in the sixth month, the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy that is, that Gabriel appeared to Mary. When you are pregnant no other calendar matters...except the pulsing time-piece of the little beating heart at home deep within you. A life so close to one's own that it is indistinguishable from the quivers of one's own viscera when it shudders in its sleep. It is Elizabeth's child who is keeps the clock in this saga...preparing a way for the wild and wilderness words that Mary is about to receive. It was in the sixth month...not of any King's rule or reign, but in the sixth month of Barren Elizabeth's expectancy that Gabriel appeared to Mary.

Yes, he came to her...unexpectedly, uninvited, but he came anyway. He was sent to her. Gabriel was sent to her as a messenger of God – to speak and to bring this news - (was it good news?) It certainly was news!

Gabriel was sent to Mary to bring greetings from God. He was sent by God from wherever angels come from to a town in Galilee called Nazareth...to her, not to simply anyone, but to Mary in particular...with favored greetings and an incredibly holy word, “The Lord is with you.”

We often wish this on one another, “God be with you.” What are we wishing on one another with this presumptuous blessing? “God be with you?” God with Mary, filling her with life beyond her own, stretching her psyche and physique, changing the shape of her body and of her life forever...in this holy encounter.

Perplexed, Mary’s hackles rise...what sort of greeting is this? And this “person”...this presence that is clearly in her space...what to do with this angel? Before she could find words, the next thing she knew, Gabriel burst out with one incredible word after another tumbling from his angelic mouth... “Don’t be afraid,” he said to her – *yeah sure*, “you have found favor with God.” - *who me?* “And now, (*right now??*) you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great...” – *just a moment!* “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...” **Gabriel, Gabriel, slow down, slow down...** you’ve lost Mary in this miraculous moment.

Stunned, Mary said to the angel, “How can this be...(what did you say about conceiving and bearing a son...I couldn’t really hear anything that you said beyond that...I can’t **conceive** of this) “how can this be, since I do not know a man?” Strange, when Zechariah challenged Gabriel with what seemed like good reason to question impending parenthood – the angel said, “be quiet – and for nine months” Perhaps, Zechariah’s protest wasn’t as convincing...for he knew about men and he had a woman, albeit an old one...but he knew of the ways of women and men and of the intimacy from which children were conceived. How many “old” people have been surprised by a child from love in late life? Maybe even some here tonight know of this astonishing reality!

“How can this be?” Mary demanded... and the angel answered her... an arch angel and a young girl in conversation! HOW CAN THIS BE!! “I’ll tell you...” Gabriel spoke, offering words of explanation (as wild as they were) and an invitation to action, In contrast to being silenced, this young woman was filled with such expectation that very soon magnificent words of praise would flow from her lips... Gabriel restates his message, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you: therefore the child born to you will be holy; he will be the Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son;’ and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible with God.”

There they were ...Mary and Gabriel...(Medieval writers suggest that she was reading from Isaiah 7 when he appeared. Ancient paintings suggest that she was spinning at her wheel...spinning the shroud which would be wrapped around Jesus’ body at his death.)

Yes. there they were, on the most ordinary of days, in the most common of places – a village called Nazareth - with holiness at hand, and with the angelic visitors last words dangling in the air, “...nothing is impossible with God.” Imagine this moment...angel and young woman – ...Gabriel, it seems, waiting for Mary’s response. Mary collecting herself – her question “How can this be?” fresh from her tongue...But then, Mary speaks...*Fiat mihi (Latin)* “Let it be to me according to your word,” and Gabriel is gone. The Gospel reading ends with the angel departing from her - no further words of blessing or instruction, a simple parting – and the world is turned upside down...nothing ever to be the same again.

“How can this be...?” Young, old, female, male...priestly or ordinary – the Holy Spirit descends, the power of the Most High overshadows and new life bursts within forth...for possibility has no power over God.

Emmaus Road travelers: A few questions for us...

- Do you feel empty and barren? Does hopelessness sap more strength than you seem able to replenish?
- What labels do you take upon yourself that prevent new life from taking hold? Ones such as too young or too old, not talented enough, not experienced enough? Too common, too ordinary... “I’m just me.”
- What labels do we assign to others which prevent gestating life from taking its hold in those early secret and hidden places of growth? Labels such as, “He’s always been that way or she’ll never change...he is difficult to relate to, etc...
- Are there stirrings within you that you have trouble believing could come to you...for they would be “impossible?”
- After you get past the “how can this be?” can you bring yourself to say “yes” to God’s surprising message?

Mary was called to be the mother of Jesus. We are called to be his hands and his feet. How can this be? The Holy Spirit descends upon us, the power of the Most High overshadows us...and into barren places Christ’s life is born. May we go about preparing for His coming anew into our hearts! AMEN