

Gabriel's Message

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Bible Reading

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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."

Mary said to the angel, "How can his be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy. He will be called 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 will be impossible with God." Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. *(Luke 1:26-38)*

Reading from Swedenborg

"Gabriel" means the ministry of those who teach from the Bible that Jehovah came into the world, and that the humanity he took on there is "the Son of God," and is divine. This is why the angel who announced this to Mary is called "Gabriel." *(Apocalypse Revealed #548.2)*

Sermon

Mary: This being appears and says, "Greetings, favored one." Let me tell you, I'm a little shocked. No angel has ever spoken to me before. Usually I am only aware of them, like a sweet perfume in the air. But this one I can hear. And so formal! "Greetings, favored one!" What kind of "hello" is that? No one ever said that to me before. Needless to say, I stop and think about it.

But wait until I tell you what he wants! He calls me favored one, but he's the one who wants a favor. At first I don't get what he's talking about. He starts telling about a baby I'm having, like I'm already

married—which I'm not. Then he starts going on about the Son of the Most High and the throne of David and kingdoms that have no end—making no sense at all. And he tells me to name the baby "Joshua," a perfectly normal name—as if I need an angel of the Lord to tell me to name a baby "Joshua." It means "he will save." I think about the baby's name, and I think about "Son of the Most High," and I start getting a little nervous.

So I try to get him to make some sense. I go back to the baby. I say, "Look, I'm not even married." And he says, "Don't worry, God will take care of everything." This is big. I need to think.

Preacher: What an odd request. God says, "birth me." That's enough to make anybody ponder. Right away we find out that this new Kingdom needs an active, willing role by an unlikely agent: an ordinary girl.

Gabriel asks a teenager to do a favor; to be an agent of God; to take the great risk; to do the most natural thing in the world a young woman can do: have a baby, love someone, be part of the creative process.

Bring new life into the world. This baby is Love itself wanting to live—and to struggle and to die—among us. This baby is God requesting a place on planet earth.

Gabriel: The Lord God Almighty becomes present in me to deliver a message to a young woman of an esoteric tribe in an occupied land: Favored one, do me a favor. Be the one through whom I become present on earth. Favored one, be my channel. Favored one, be my mother. Feed me, teach me to walk, diaper me, guide me, tell me the stories I need to grow on, give me a home, an upbringing, a future among people.

Preacher: Gabriel delivers his message to Mary: the opportunity to become an agent in God's plan not to let us slip away from Love. We are slipping away, so God comes to us as one of us. What a cool thing to be the mother of. "Do me a favor, favored one. Let me come to earth through you."

Oh, what a topsy-turvy kingdom! The one who gives life asks this young woman to give life in return. The one who provides all is asking to be provided for. The one who is always present is asking for help in becoming present. Mary, pondering, maybe even chuckling, senses—even if she doesn't fully comprehend—the paradox. Mary, a teenager, is the first to find out how thoroughly the reign of God will mix up the rules and mess with our heads. The kingdom is coming. Peace—not struggle—on earth. Good-will— not oppression—to all. The kingdom is coming, not in might and splendor, but totally dependent on human nurture.

But what difference does it make? Why should a human birth God? What does it mean to make God a flesh-and-bones reality on earth? To birth and nurture God? To raise God up in a community of people? To let God go out into the world when old enough to be independent? What does it mean?

It means giving Love a chance to live. Every act of good, everything that is true, is God being born—borne—on earth. All that comes from God is Love and Wisdom; all love and wisdom come from God. Yes, we'll still have wars, ecological disaster, cheating, abuse, theft; because not every person chooses (or can choose) to be a God-bearer. Saying "no" to bearing God is saying no to lighting a candle in the darkness. All good—all light—is of God. Each good is a candle. Without every "yes" our inner Mary says to Gabriel's request, it would be a totally dark world.

Mary isn't struggling with "why." She's struggling with "whether." Surely she knows her religious history. But she is being asked to break the holy laws of her people, to step out of the norm. Well . . . wait a minute. What is the norm for this people? The norm includes some fairly abnormal stuff. The norm includes prophets and angels.

Mary: "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you." Well, duh. The Lord is with everyone. I know that. And I am with the Lord. The Lord knows that. "The Lord is with you." What a goofy thing to say! As if there's ever been any doubt.

Our stories tell us that. We've had stories since the beginning of time, you know. And there have always been angels in the story. Angels go up and down the ladder. One wrestles with our ancestor Jacob. And before that, angels tell Sarah she's going to have a baby. . . . But she has a husband. An angel comes to Daniel in the lions' den so they don't eat him. So I know angels keep us safe.

And I know that God pops out of the most unexpected places: in bushes that are on fire, and in columns of smoke rising in the desert, and in the little voice hiding inside of us. So I start to put two and two together. I know that God has been telling a story forever, and I know angels are part of that story, and that real people— real women—are part of that story. So why not me?!

"The Lord is with you" this Gabriel says.

"And I am with the Lord" I can reply—the Lord I know and trust, and who tells one terrific story.

Preacher: God has a story, but doesn't force us into a role. When we are fortunate enough to hear Gabriel's message whispered in our heart—or to see it written on the two-by-four that is banging us on the head—perplexed, we will ponder. Gabriel does not merely inform Mary of her destiny and then depart. He waits for her reply. Perplexed, she ponders. God does not force Godself upon anyone. We must say "yes" for the deed to be done. Because this is not the issuing of an order, a superior declaiming to a sub-ordinate. God is courting Mary. God has said yes to Mary, and now waits to see if Mary will say yes in return.

Gabriel: I thought I would hedge my bets. I knew she had the right to say "no," but also knew how important this was. So I didn't ask her, I told her: You will conceive in your womb and you will bear a son. But I cannot leave it at that. I cannot leave until Mary responds—Mary, who is pondering—taking the time she needs. She can say no, so it is a good sign that instead she is pondering. Because God issues requests, not orders. God comes courting, not demanding. God asks for participation. I cannot go until she gives me a reply.

Preacher: The angel stands and waits for her response. Even though he has stated his request as fact, "You will conceive," he cannot leave until Mary responds. She is pondering. She stays connected to her inner knowing, to the voice within, to the long story of her people, to the women and men who have gone before, to the intersection of the story of people and God. She stays connected and finally looks at God's messenger and says, in a quiet explosion of Truth, "Here am I."

Mary: It comes down to this. I've always believed in God; I've always believed in me; I've always believed in the story. But I never thought the stories were that real! Of course they're true; but unexpected babies and parted seas and lion's dens—they don't happen to me! And then I look at this

glowing reality who is waiting. Waiting for my answer. I suddenly figure out: I need to agree to this, even though he said “you will conceive and you will name the baby.” He hasn’t left! I have to think.

But what is there to think about, really? If God is real, if I’m real, if the story of God loving the world is real, then there is only one thing to rely on. This is God’s work, not mine. Without even having a husband, I’m going to have a baby. Not because of myself or because of any man, but because a miracle’s going to happen.

Who in her right mind would say no to a miracle? Who in her right mind would say no being the mother of this baby? There is only one thing I can say: “Here am I. Let it be as you say.”

Preacher: Can it be that “Here am I” is as obvious a statement to this young woman as is “the Lord is with you”? Here am I. Yes, she knows she is present. God has said, “Meet me on earth. Meet me in life!” But we have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten that we are part of a gigantic love story.

“Let it be,” she responds. “Let it be.” Let God be—be, become, become one of us. Let it be that God comes to us to remind us that we come out of Love, in the image and likeness of Love and Wisdom.

Because Mary allowed herself to be overtaken by the Holy Spirit, allowed herself to be transformed, allowed herself to say yes to her divine vocation, said yes to taking her place in the unfolding of God’s story, the whole world changed. A world gone out of balance would be put back into equilibrium; a world where freedom was lost would have freedom restored; a world that had turned its back on Love would experience Love once again.

Mary: You know what? This is tougher than I thought. In the cold light of day, watching my belly swell, watching the looks I get on the street, hearing the talk that happens behind my back, with the perfume of the angel no longer making my head swim, I realize I’ve done something very odd.

When I was a child, I thought growing up and getting married and having a baby was just normal. I didn’t really see, when I said yes, how it would change me . . . how it would change all of us.

Preacher: God picks the holy and pure, yes. But God picks some unlikely characters, too. Mary is young in a world where age counts, poor in a world where wealth counts, female in a world where maleness counts, without status in a world where status counts.

No matter who you think you are, you too are asked to live a God-bearing life: bearing God as a reality into the world; bearing God into each other’s lives. Each of us—no matter what.

Gabriel: God picks all sorts of people. So if you think you’re the wrong sort of person to have a starring role in God’s movie, think again, because God picks all the wrong people. Sarah was just an ordinary old woman. Her husband, Abraham, was a coward. Jacob was a liar and a thief. Moses was a murderer. Mary was just a kid. Is there something about you that makes you think God is not going to pick you? Are you thinking, “God, the captain of cosmic basketball, is not going to pick me for the team? I can stay on the bench.” Start getting your excuses lined up: “Oh, there was that business failure; there was that abortion; I left my siblings to care for aging parents; I lied in important circumstances; I spent tons of money on myself and then claimed I didn’t have anything to give to charity; there was that time I didn’t offer help when I could have; I’m too old; I’m too young; I’m too smart; I’m too dumb; I’m nobody in particular. Surely God does not expect me to bear God’s presence into the world. Surely I will not be faced with those fearsome words: ‘Greetings, favored one.’ ”

Think again. God still needs to be birthed into the world . . . daily. And God picks all kinds of people.

Preacher: The kingdom is totally dependent on the nurture of humans. The kingdom cannot exist unless we state the obvious: “Here am I,” and do the unimaginable: birth the Creator. The kingdom sends angels all the time:

- To greet us: “Hail.”
- To tell us who we are: “Favored one.”
- To tell us about a real relationship: “The Lord is with you.”

And to give us our call; our request from God; our personal mission; our purpose. “This is who you really are,” God says, and then waits. Waits for the answer; waits to see if we faint or protest or throw the angel out. Waiting . . . the great moment of suspend-ed breath. Waiting to find out if we will step into our own unique role in the Great Love Story. Will we say, “Here am I. Let it be”?

Every time we commit an act of kindness or beauty, every-thing good or true that we do is God moving through us as light into darkness. All the light in the world is brought by those who say yes to birthing God. Gabriel is in our houses, sitting in our cars, walking down the street, going shopping with us . . . always. It is an unending request—that we birth God. It is an unending message that God sends: “Greetings, favored one.” And then heaven holds its breath waiting for our reply.

Prayer

Creator God, we have heard the voice of your angel Gabriel speaking to us, telling us that we are chosen to bring your presence into this world, yet waiting for our response; waiting for us to say yes. As we ponder this call from you, “Greetings, favored one,” we ask, “Why did you choose me?” Yet you did choose us and ordain us to bring forth the fruit of the spirit. Thank you, O God, for waiting patiently for our answer. And thank you for being the one who gives us the will and the ability to answer, “Here am I. Let it be according to your word.” Amen.