



## **“Mary’s Story”**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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**The Third Sunday of Advent**

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*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. And now, 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."*

*"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

*"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 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."*

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

- Luke 1:26-38

The Grinch that stole Christmas was right to complain about the "Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise! That's one thing he hated the NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!" Christmas is loud. Carols, commercials, and crowds constantly cackle so that it is easy to miss anyone who whispers. We complain and brag about how crowded our calendars are. Everyone wants us at their party. We complain and brag about the gift we have to buy our eight-year-old in order to compete with the parents of other eight-

year-olds. We complain and brag about the trips we have to make because so many of our relatives want to see us at Christmas.

The volume is stuck on eleven at Christmas. Our hometown is hard for people who want silence—cars, firetrucks, garbage trucks, planes, helicopters, and I-phones. We are always on the alert for the ping of a new text or email.

Noise is a problem in a variety of ways. A study from Cornell University claims that noise keeps us from tasting our food. Loud restaurants are a really bad idea. And yet, research published in the *British Medical Journal* says that too much noise makes us fat. For every five decibel increase above 45 decibels—pretty much the level of traffic noise—the average person sees an extra 2mm increase—millimeters is something British—around their waist. The doctors' theory is that noise makes people too tired to exercise.

We are starting to see some quiet rebellions against the noise. Maybe you have seen an ad for the quiet chair—a chair that uses technology to shut out sound around you. The best-selling washers and dryers right now are the ones that claim to be the quietest. Do they have a designated silent hairdresser where you get your haircut? It is a thing.

Customers can get their hair done without saying a word. There is an app called Avoid Humans. The app helps people find quiet places—anti-social media. (How to Have a Quiet Christmas, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/how-to-have-a-quiet-christmas/>)

We are so used to hearing what we have no choice but hear and remaining deaf to what we most need to hear that it is hard to listen. We can go for days without hearing anything that sounds like peace. God is not the loudest sound

of the season, but as Yogi Berra put it, “You can hear a lot by listening.”

Gabriel is flying through the night so silently that nobody notices. The angel goes to a quiet, insignificant village, to a tiny house, to a woman who is sleeping, dreaming of the man to whom she is engaged. Gabriel tiptoes into the room almost as if he is an intruder. He straightens his robe, and takes a deep breath.

The angel stands there without a sound looking at this peasant girl. She is young, innocent, and hardly old enough to have a child. Is this the right place? Did he get the address wrong?

When Gabriel first speaks it is so quiet that Mary does not hear. Mary thinks she might have heard something. Maybe it was the wind. She decides it was nothing. She rolls over and sighs.

God in heaven whispers to Gabriel, “What are you waiting for? Talk to her.”

The angel sounds apologetic, “Wake up.”

Mary thinks about pulling the blanket over her head—it is the middle of the night—but then decides to listen.

She hears the angel say, “Hi.”

Mary is frightened. What is happening?

God in heaven whispers, “Gabriel, tell her what’s happening.”

Gabriel’s voice is like the sound of snow falling, “Stay calm. God loves you so much, Mary. God is with you.”

Mary is shaking, but she listens. She does not want to miss anything. The angel says, even more gently, “Mary, don’t be afraid. I know how this sounds, but you’re going to have a baby, a boy, and you’ll name him Jesus.”

Mary is sure she heard wrong—“a baby?” What is going on?

God says silently, “Gabriel, tell her what’s going on.”

The angel does a curious thing. He begins to chant.

The message is so marvelous it is musical. The angel sings, “Mary, your child will be great, the son of the Highest, the long-awaited one, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary is stuck back at “You’re going to have a baby.” She thinks, “A child? This makes no sense.”

The angel says, “It’s going to be God’s child. Elizabeth is having a baby, too. You know how old she is. No one would have thought that was possible either.”

Mary is frightened and amazed. She has to listen to her heart and decide whether to take hold of the unknown life the angel has not described with much detail. She could decide that she did not really hear anything. She is not sure what God has in mind, but Mary answers, “Okay.” God in heaven smiles.

What if Mary had not been listening? What if she did not hear the music? Is it possible that Gabriel went to other houses before Mary’s, but the women in those houses were not listening?

This is Ann Weems: “Mary, Nazareth Girl:

What did you know of ethereal beings  
with messages from God?

What did you know of men  
when you found yourself with child?

What did you know of babies?

You, barely out of childhood yourself?

God-chosen girl:

What did you know of God that brought you to this  
(moment)?

Blessed among women?

Could it be that you had been ready, waiting,  
listening for the footsteps of an angel?

Could it be there are messages for us if we have the faith to listen?"

Do you remember what Joan of Arc said at her trial, "What a pity that you are an archbishop and you cannot hear the songs of angels"? What a pity if we come to worship and cannot hear the songs of angels.

What if we listened like Mary? Would we hear God saying, "Wake up. Listen to Jesus' story, Mary's story, and love's story. Listen for choirs of angels, sung in exultation. Listen to this congregation sing, 'Praise, O God, our loving maker, Christ, our friend, God the Spirit.' Listen to the prayers for peace and justice. Listen to the silence that leads to hope. Listen like people who want to hear."

Fred Craddock tells this story about how God invites us to listen: I recall once in Israel, being in Bethlehem and having a Jewish man explain the Christmas story to me. He explained this when we were standing in Shepherd's Field. There is a field down in the lower part where there were once tents. Now there is a housing development.

He said, "On a clear night if you stand down there looking toward the city, there's a bright star, and it looks like it's standing right over the houses. And that's what happened at Christmas."

Of course, he was mixing Matthew and Luke. He was not really an expert on all this. He explained that this is how people got confused and thought there was a star over the house where Jesus was.

When he finished, I said, "Well, that's one way to look at it."

Then he said something interesting: "I know that's just one way to look at it. When I was in school, the rabbi explained everything in scripture two different ways. When he would come to a miracle, he would explain it two different

ways, and his reason was this: If something happens and you can't hear it another way, then God didn't say it" (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, St. Louis: Chalice, 2001, 39).

That is not bad. God never sits us down and says, "Now listen, you don't have any choice. I'm going to make you listen."

We can always choose not to listen. The question when we do listen is not whether the things we hear are chance or God's voice because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance voice through which God cannot say something. There is no event so commonplace but that God does not speak within it.

We come to worship and listen for God so that we will remember to listen for God each day. When you wake up in the morning, decide to listen to your life. Listen to the Christmas carols, a friend's "Merry Christmas," and someone humming "Joy to the World." Listen for planes and hope that someone is going home for Christmas.

Listen for the crying baby that reminds you of the now grown babies you used to pray would stop crying. Listen for the high-pitched laughter of someone who does not want you to know they are laughing. Listen for the heartbeat of someone you love. In the sound of rain hitting the window, the tick-tock of an old clock, the whispers of the evening, the silent, holy night, and listen for God.

Who knows what we might hear? We might hear a voice invite us to a different kind of December. We might hear a voice suggest that we ignore the trivial and listen for what matters. We might hear a voice invite us to spend less and give more, to give a real gift, a gift of yourself, a gift to someone who will not expect a gift, an anonymous gift, a gift to someone who cannot give to you, or a gift to someone who is lonely. We might hear a voice invite us to include the

left out, those who know the pain of broken relationships, those who are ill, and those who are hurting.

We might hear a voice that cracks our hopes wide open, a voice that invites us to love people we have not even thought about loving—the least obvious, least qualified, least likely to get our attention. We might hear a voice that makes a joke out of our priorities, a voice that makes us long for authenticity, and a voice that promises that we can hear more.

Most of what is loud is unimportant, but it makes it hard to hear what we need to hear. There is a voice that will help us follow, one step at a time, down the path of peace.

We can be still enough to hear and find a quiet center. We can make a space for silence in the rush of all of our doings. We can learn to pay attention in the midst of our busyness. God is here, speaking to those who listen.

*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

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