

Gabriel must have shown up late to the meeting when angelic duties were being parceled out. Or perhaps he drew the short straw. From what I can tell, barging in on a poor, uneducated small-town girl and explaining to her that God had personally chosen her to bring the fullness of God's divinity into the world, through her flesh and blood, was not an enviable task. The appearance to the women at the empty tomb probably went first, followed by the messages to Zechariah and Joseph. But telling this news to this girl — not just explaining it, but explaining it in a way that would make her *actually want to go through with the plan*? Oh, and by the way, God's entire plan for the salvation of humanity depends on Mary saying yes, but hey, no pressure. That job must have ranked just below creating an image of Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich.

However it came to be Gabriel's job, the annunciation reveals volumes about God, about Mary, and about us, all in a very compact story. When people speculate about why God chose Mary to be what our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters call *theotokos*, or the God-bearer, we usually focus on her low social status. But God must have loved her personality, too. Anyone else would hear this mind-bending news and be overcome with terror — or perhaps smug self-satisfaction — “Well of course God would choose *me*.” Instead, Mary thinks through Gabriel's words and responds with a question. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

She probably expected that she would not like the answer, but I'm sure there was more going through her mind than that. In those days of extended families living together, Mary would have known just how difficult it is to raise a child under the best of circumstances. And she also knew that with no socially acceptable explanation for her pregnancy, her circumstances would get very bad, very quickly. But Mary was fearless. She was not afraid of Gabriel, not afraid of society, not afraid of the unknown. Her faith in God was so great that it overwhelmed any other consideration or concern, and that faith let her accomplish God's will for her.

Does faith like Mary's still exist today? Some would say that Mary is a unique case, that no one else could or should be expected to have as much faith as she did. Yet what was inherently unique to Mary was not her faith, but only her mission. The incarnation is a unique event in history, not to be repeated. As such, it gave Mary unique opportunities to demonstrate her faith, and she consistently rose to the occasion. God has different plans for each of us, precisely tailored to our personalities and the gifts God has given us. So all of us can hope, and work, to have faith like Mary's faith, faith that defines us to the exclusion of any other concern.

Mary made it look easy. How difficult it truly is to have faith like hers. Our secular culture, with its heavy emphases on greed and fear, works directly against faith. That has always been true to some extent, but it seems that the present-day aversion to commitment marks a new low. Is it just me, or is it like pulling teeth to get most people to commit to anything these days? From what I've seen, we at Advent can still commit and get things done, but that seems more and more to be an exceptional situation in our society. And increasing fear or hostility toward commitment is a real problem. When we can't or won't commit to things, we cheat ourselves out of opportunities to grow, we delay God's good work in us, and we deny the world the benefits of God's plans that God wants to accomplish through us.

It's true that God doesn't lay out every last detail of how things are going to turn out. God set this world up so that most of our decisions are made with imperfect and very fragmentary information. Perhaps that is because God wants us to make choices based on what's right and wrong, instead of what benefits we calculate that we will accumulate from them. Or put another way, the knowledge that a particular choice or commitment is God's will is all the information we need. And what a dull world it would be if everything were spelled out for us in advance.

God only rarely communicates through dramatic angelic visits, but God does reveal God's will, as today's collect puts it, by daily visitation. God never ceases working in the world, and remains with us as God's plans unfold through us. So I urge you, respond to God's plans with the same faithfulness that Mary modeled.

Remember the words of Gabriel to Mary. “Do not be afraid... you have found favor with God.” The

Lord is no less with us than with Mary. Because he is the same God, he will deal no less graciously with us than with her. God will sustain us if we can only summon the strength of faith to let God in, if we too can only say yes.