

*Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)*

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep  
darkness—  
on them light has shined.

<sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing  
plunder.

<sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of  
Midian.

<sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his  
kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and  
forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do  
this.

*Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)*

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>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 Son of God. <sup>36</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>Then 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.

*Lately, it seems like there is something newly frightening in the headlines every day. What are we really afraid of? More to the point, what will be our response? We begin Advent by considering the fear and uncertainty faced by a Galilean teenager.*

We can hardly turn on the television or glance at the newspaper without getting inundated with the latest bad news. Gloom and doom seems to lurk around every corner. I doubt things are really as bad as some would like us to think (yes, bad news sells.) But still, it takes some effort to put away the fear, even if just for a short time. We wish we knew better what the coming months holds in store for us. We are facing an unknown that threatens to terrify us, paralyze us, and rob of us whatever peace of mind we might have enjoyed.

Sometimes it can be hard to pinpoint the source of our anxieties, but not now. The question that faces us all is how we will respond to the fears and anxieties that seem to be sweeping our nation. Where will we turn for reassurance? In whom will we trust?

Talking about our fears may seem to be an odd way to begin the season of Advent, but consider Mary's "Advent" and how it began. She is an engaged but yet-to-be-wed virginal young teenager, when an angel from God arrives and tells her that she is

#### What is the Opposite of Faith?

Fear & faith. We sometimes tend to think that doubt is the opposite of faith, but Fred Craddock reminds us that it is fear, not doubt, that is the opposite of faith. Part of this is a language problem.

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as "faith." Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, "faith" does not. No one says, "I faithed yesterday." This is too bad, because Bible translations use "believe" as the verb form of "faith," even though "believe" speaks to a state of mind, including an opinion. Similarly, "doubt" refers to a state of mind. But the best synonym for "faith" is "trust." Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, "What do you think?," as it is "Whom do you trust?" Doubt is a "head" word, but "fear" and "faith" are both heart words.

pregnant. Despite the angel's reassurances, Mary knows quite well the difficulties that will arise from the announcement of her pregnancy. Just try to put yourself in her place and then read today's passage from Luke.

#### A "frightening" announcement

The simple, holy dignity of Luke's gospel is evident throughout this passage and it will repay a slow reading! Luke opens his Gospel (Luke 1:5-25) by telling us how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, an old priest going about his daily duties. That would certainly be a frightening experience; there is a reason the angels always say, "Be not afraid," when they show up.

Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, to be named John, who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." This child would grow to be John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time.<sup>1</sup> Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow!

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her! Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne! Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! How could she possibly explain a pregnancy? What would everyone assume, even Joseph? Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The word "overshadow" (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all. Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children.

I'm sure that Mary must have found all this too much to comprehend. But Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Notice that Gabriel uses the future tense, echoing Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is

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<sup>1</sup> In most ancient cultures, indeed for most of human history, people married young, pretty much as soon as they were old enough for sex and, hence, children.

possible for God” (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn’t visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God’s story to move forward.

### The Incarnation

Our word “incarnate” comes from a Latin word meaning “be made flesh.” (“Carnivorous” is based on the same Latin root.) Thus, when we refer to the incarnation or to “God incarnate,” we are referring to “God made flesh” . . . God becoming human.

The early church had a word they used to describe Mary that is helpful here: *theotokos*, “the one who gave birth to the one who is Christ. We sometimes think that the point of the Virgin Birth is to emphasize Jesus’ divinity. It is not. The early church embraced the teachings about the Virgin Birth because it emphasized Jesus’ humanity! An early Christian heretic named Marcion very much believed that Jesus was God. But he couldn’t bring himself to see Jesus as truly human, saying, “Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes.” All the messiness of childbirth was too much for Marcion. But that very messiness drives home our proclamation that God has experienced life as we experience it. He has celebrated as we celebrate, suffered as we suffer, and perhaps most astounding of all, God has shared in our fears . . .

### *The Name of Jesus*

Though we often take names for granted, in the Bible names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. God’s revealing of his name to Moses was a momentous event in the story of the exodus (Exodus 3:13-15). Sometimes, God would even change a person’s name to convey a new meaning, such as changing Abram’s name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5).

Mary is told that her baby’s name is to be Jesus. “Jesus” is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning “Yahweh [God’s name] is salvation.” Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

The name, Joshua (or Yeshua) was a very ordinary name in Jesus’ day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called “the Son of the Most High,” a striking title, and that he will sit on David’s throne, where he will reign over God’s people (the “House of Jacob”) forever. Indeed, Jesus’ “kingdom will have no end.” All this is in keeping with

promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God’s kingdom on earth.

### *When we are scared*

Fears test our faith, whether it is the fear of job loss, illness, failure, or anything else in our extensive catalogue of worries. The question is whether we will hold tight to God and to our confidence that we are his, the sheep of his pasture. Faith is no guarantee of an easy or worry-free life; God has made us no such promise. But it *is* faith for which we have been made, a people created in God’s image who are to know God and enjoy God forever. And it is in the lived faith of disciples that we can find the peace that passes all understanding and the confidence that one day God’s mercy, justice, and healing will transform our world and each of us. Let us be more like Mary, who in the face of frightful perplexity, simply said, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

## Darkness and Light

Today's passage from Isaiah begins with the image of a people in darkness. The darkness, the absence of light, is a physical and spiritual reality in the Bible. Darkness is also an apt symbol of some of the most profound human experiences. "With approximately two hundred references, darkness is a major actor in the biblical drama."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most intriguing is this. Unlike virtually all other biblical images, darkness is unambiguously negative. There are no good aspects or manifestations of darkness in the Bible. Perhaps it is reasonable to be afraid of the dark!

From its literal beginning, the Bible depicts the on-going struggle of the light to overcome the darkness. "Let there be light!" is God's first act of creation. And the conquering of the darkness begins. If darkness is ignorance, then the light is understanding (Psalm 82:5). If the light is goodness, darkness is the evil acts of those who oppose God (Proverbs 2:13). If light enables us to see who God is, then the darkness makes us blind (Matthew 6:22-23).

In the New Testament, darkness is very much a spiritual reality. Jesus speaks of the "power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). For Paul, the world is divided into the "children of light" and the "children of darkness" (1 Thess. 5:5).

In contrast, the light is both life-giving and protective. It represents goodness and blessing. Light is the symbol of truth. God himself is light. The church is a community of light, made up of disciples who are to be the light to the world.

It isn't hard to see how the light becomes a symbol of salvation. Redemption consists of emerging from the darkness into the light. Further, the struggle between light and darkness is never a battle of equals. If, as John says, Jesus is the "true light, which enlightens the world," then the only question is when the darkness will fully and finally be overcome, and that will be with Christ's second coming.

1. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* entry on "darkness."

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What happens to young Mary is so familiar to us that we can be blind to the deep fear and uncertainty that must have threatened to drown her. Yet, she responds to Gabriel with peace and confidence in God and God's way forward. If we try to imagine our way into this story and what follows, it isn't very hard to see that Mary was a very wise choice. You might spend a few minutes compiling a portrait of Mary. Feel free to use your biblically-informed imagination in this. In what ways could we be more like Mary? How would we begin such a transformation? How would this help us in times of fear and anxiety?
2. Luke tells us that Mary was "favored" by God. But Alan Culpepper points out that being favored meant that Mary would become pregnant and bear a child out of wedlock – a child destined to die a shameful and horrible death on a Roman cross. You can bet that many of Mary's townspeople weren't very understanding of her condition! I suspect that God's favor towards us might not always conform to what we think favor ought to look like. Mary was called to be obedient and she obeyed. We are called to be obedient. Do we obey? Do we see the power that lies in being obedient to God? Does our obedience ever cost us anything? Do we think that God's favor – God's grace! – comes cheaply?
3. The biblical use of light and darkness works on many levels. What is the darkness in your own life? Perhaps it is a health problem of a loved one or even yourself. Perhaps it is an addiction that threatens your life and your loved ones. Perhaps your darkness is a growing sense that the priorities in your life are messed up. How are you dealing with the "darkness" of an economic recession? What are you learning about your own faith? Perhaps you are coming to realize that you go days without ever even thinking of God. How does Jesus and the Good News about Jesus bring light to this darkness?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, 1 Samuel 1:1-28</b> Hannah, who is unable to have children, prays to God for a child. God grants her petition. Her son will be the prophet Samuel.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 2 Samuel 7:4-17</b> God makes a promise to David about David's name and throne.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Isaiah 2:2-5</b> A portrait of the coming days when God puts all things right.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Luke 1:5-25</b> The angel Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Luke 1:39-56</b> Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth.</p>	<p><b>Saturday, Luke 1:57-80</b> John the Baptist is born.</p>

