

# Fourth Sunday of Advent, Gospel, Year B

WHAT SORT OF GREETING IS THAT?

Luke 1:26-38

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

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

DIAGNOSIS: "The Lord Is with You!" = Bad News

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Fear of

## Revelation

Just for a moment there, maybe even longer, Mary wished Gabriel had not appeared. She “pondered” (literally, “dialogued or reasoned within herself”) what sort of greeting it might be when the Angel Gabriel (“God is my strength”) shows up and says, “You’re the one!” Generally, it’s not a good thing to come into such close contact with God or God’s messengers. Will Mary be told next, as Gideon was (Judges 6:12) to put together an army, or as David was (2 Sam. 7:3) to build (and, then again, not to build) a temple? Or, like King Asa (2 Chr. 15:2), will she have to reform Israel? The internal dialogue must have opened with fear and foreboding, else why would Gabriel’s next line be “Do not be afraid”?

Is any of us prepared to look up from what we are doing and see the messenger of God holding out a “honey do” list? Not me. Not today. Maybe never.

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Know Yourself

The second line in Mary’s internal dialogue was this: “But look at me! I’m only Mary!” If someone had asked her to fetch water, she would have obediently complied; evaluating her own appearances, she would have thought, Yeah, I can do that. I totally can. All by myself. Since I was six! But she didn’t feel or look to herself like a servant of God, one who would mother the Son of the Most High. Talk about opposites! It was Mary’s knowing herself that blocked her from opening herself without hesitation to the Lord’s gift and commission.

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Will I Be Ruined?

The internal back-and-forth of Mary must have included, before she replied with faith, the possibility of ruin. Didn’t she have plans already for a wedding? Hadn’t the chapel been reserved? Wouldn’t her parents, not to mention Joseph, be in distress? How would she ever explain her way out of what was about to come

upon her?

PROGNOSIS: "The Lord Is with You!" = Good News

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): OMG

The word "ponder" occurs a second time in Luke 2, after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." What words? The words of shepherds who repeated to Mary and Joseph what angels had told them. The dialogue inside Mary's mind when she was first greeted by Gabriel ends on a positive note. She is not afraid it was a bad thing that the Lord was/would be with her. She knows it is good news for all. God is with us, Immanuel.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Knowing God

The truth of what was promised by Gabriel is experienced by unmarried Mary in the testimony of faithful shepherds. It turns out that "the Lord is with you" is a promise of salvation, of peace to those whom God favors—which means those who trust in the Lord. It's all right that Mary wasn't so sure she was a fit vessel for God Almighty on earth. People would doubt Jesus' credentials, too. We doubt ours as well—if we only gaze inwards, doing a personal abilities inventory. We need to lift our ears up unto the Lord.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Joy of Revelation

With Mary, listening as Mary did (enough with the pondering for now), we join her in saying "Let it be with us according to your Word." Angels come, angels go. Jesus comes, (eventually) goes, but his Spirit abides with us forever: a Spirit of revelation and of peace. Joy to the world! The Lord is come.