

# 1.

## *Gaze with Humility*

(The Annunciation)

### A Moment to Ponder

*by Kelly Wahlquist*

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks to King Ahaz (735–715 BC), reassuring the king that God would not abandon his people, who were being swept up in war against two powerful enemies. Aram (Syria) and Israel would soon be destroyed, but Judah and the line of David would continue. The king hesitates, and the Lord tells the king to ask for a sign; the monarch refuses: “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test” (Is 7:12).

Isaiah’s response rings down through the ages to our ears, prophesying (or heralding) a child who would one day save his people. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman’u=el” (Is 7:14).

Seven centuries pass, and now Rome is in power. In his epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul declares the freedom that rightly belongs to the children of God, who recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise of the Messiah: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son,

born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Gal 4:4–5, RSV).

All these things—the prophets foretelling the miracle, the apostle interpreting the events of the recent past—are central to our faith. And yet, it is in the Incarnation itself—the Son of God conceived in the womb of the virgin who had with all humility fully consented to the plan of God—that is the distinctive sign of the Christian faith.

Come with me, and listen as time and space grow still, as an angel of the Lord reveals himself to a teenager from a small-town village, living in loving obscurity and poised to give assent to the plan God set in motion at the dawn of creation.

## Enter the Scripture

*by Sarah Christmyer*

*Read Luke 1:26–38 before you start.*

The announcement came many months before the baby. “Aunt Sarah, guess what? We’re expecting!” My niece was so excited she couldn’t stop talking. “If it’s a boy we have a name, but I don’t know what to do if it’s a girl. I wonder who he’ll look like. Or she. Oh, I wonder if it will have red hair? And I can’t wait to feel it move!”

It was a while before I could get a word in. Her attention was turned inside, toward the baby, and almost nothing else mattered. The eyes of her heart were busy searching the shadows of her womb, seeking any clue about who that child would be.

Today we can find out all kinds of things about a baby. Ultrasounds can tell the sex and due date, spot abnormalities, and provide a ghostly photo of the baby’s face. You can test fetal DNA to find out who the father is. But no amount

of scientific testing can tell you the kinds of things the angel Gabriel announced to the young girl he was sent to visit in Nazareth more than 2,000 years ago, about a child not yet conceived.

The annunciation (which is a fancy way to say “announcement”) of her impending pregnancy came to Mary out of the blue. She was what we would call engaged, but more so: a binding marriage contract had been signed, and she and Joseph were considered married even though a year might pass before the wedding. In the meantime, it was customary for the girl to remain with her parents until the husband came to take her into his home. A betrothed girl who lived at home was assumed to remain a virgin.

Luke 1:26–38 gives us an intimate look at the moment Mary received the angel’s message. After announcing that Jesus is coming, the same angel takes the news to Joseph after Mary conceives (see Matthew 1). However, we will focus on Luke’s account as we try to see the child through Mary’s eyes. A mother knows her child like no one else, and a picture starts forming for her the moment she hears about the child.

### *His Coming Is an Occasion of Joy*

From the start, the message is suffused with joy. However irregular this birth might be, whatever clouds lie in the child’s future, his coming is *good news*. “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” says the angel (Lk 1:28). The greeting comes across like a command. “Hail” is the Greek *chaire*: literally, “Rejoice!”

Mary’s first impulse is not to rejoice, however. She is troubled. She turns the words over in her mind, considers “what sort of greeting this might be” (Lk 1:29). Perhaps it reminds her of similar commands in the Old Testament. Centuries before, God had sent the prophet Zephaniah to call Israel to get ready for God, who was coming to redeem

them: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! . . . The Lord, your God, is in your midst [literally, “in your womb”], a warrior who gives victory” (Zep 3:14, 17; see also Zechariah 9:9).

Pope Benedict XVI draws attention to “an inner resemblance between the two messages.”<sup>1</sup> The old prophecies are coming to pass, but in a completely unexpected way. Israel had long seen God as dwelling among them as though in a womb, in the Ark of the Covenant. Now he would literally come that way. *Rejoice, the Lord is with you!* Gabriel tells Mary. “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus [God saves]” (Lk 1:31).

Clearly, God has something big in mind for her. What will it entail?

### *He Will Be the Promised Messiah*

It has been almost six hundred years since a king sat on the throne of David in Jerusalem, and the Jews are struggling. God had promised David and his heirs an eternal kingdom; how is it that they continue to suffer under foreign rule? The verbal portrait Gabriel paints of Mary’s son seems to be drawn from God’s original promise to David: that his heir will be “great” and the “Son” of God; that he will sit on David’s throne and his house and kingdom will be established forever. All these promises come from 2 Samuel 7 (especially verses 9, 13–14, and 16). And Gabriel’s message echoes other Old Testament prophecies as well (see Isaiah 9:6, Daniel 7:14, and Micah 4:7). To any devout Jew, the picture would be unmistakable: Gabriel is describing the long-expected Messiah.

### *He Will Be the Son of God*

This is good news, right? But Mary doesn’t seem to register the picture. To bear the Messiah must have been every

Jewish girl's dream! But her mind is caught on something else: "How shall this be?" she asks. Not, "How shall this be, since I'm a nobody from nowhere," but "How can this be, since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34).

Her confusion has nothing to do with her lowly state, or the greatness of the child. Rather, she is puzzled by the possibility of getting pregnant at all! It's only a matter of months before she is to move in with Joseph as his wife. Her question and the angel's reply provide a mind-blowing depiction of the identity of this child-to-be. The kings of Israel had long been called God's "sons" in a figurative sense. But this child will be the Son of God—literally!

We must return to the Old Testament to get the full picture. The language of God's presence and power "overshadowing" Mary comes from the end of Exodus, when God's glory overshadowed and filled the newly built tabernacle to show the people that God was living among them. Pope Benedict XVI points out that this overshadowing is "a sign of God's self-revelation in hiddenness . . . [and that] Mary appears as God's living tent, in which he chooses to dwell among men in a new way."<sup>2</sup>

Mary did not ask for this, nor did she expect it. It is all a work of God. And yet, the God of the Universe does not force his will upon a helpless young woman, but rather . . .

### *He Waits Upon Her "Yes"*

The angel comes announcing, not demanding. Mary is humble; he is a gentleman. She is troubled and puzzled, yet she does not doubt. "Mary . . . carries on an inner dialogue with the Word that has been given her; she speaks to it and lets it speak to her in order to fathom its meaning," says Pope Benedict.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, she conceives "through her ear"—through her hearing. Her yes opens a space within, where God then makes his home. Surely God could have

simply become a man. Yet the Word enters this woman and becomes flesh within her only upon her humble assent.

“I am the handmaid [Greek *doule*, “servant”] of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,” she responds (Lk 1:38). “Let it be to me.” *So be it!* Hers is a perfect, joy-filled embrace of God’s will and action.

When the angel leaves, Mary is left alone to ponder his announcement. But there is someone who may understand! Gabriel’s parting words must have encouraged her: “And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived. . . . For with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:36–37). Soon Mary will run to share her news with Elizabeth. I can imagine her bursting with emotion all the way there, trying to choose the right words to say. “I’m expecting . . . the messiah! Only guess what? His father is *God!*”

### *Prayer*

Lord, help me to see Jesus. Help me to gaze at him with a humble heart, to see him as he really is. As I seek to understand what is beyond me, make your home in me.

## Gaze Upon Jesus: Mary, the Mother of God

*A story by Stephanie Landsem*

“Mary?” My mother’s voice drifted over the mist-shrouded courtyard.

“I’m here,” I answered.

I stood, still and expectant, waiting for the first rays of sun to rend the eastern sky. I cherished the breaking of dawn, the threshold of a new day. When light split the horizon—fingers of gold stretching into the crimson clouds—my heart lifted in prayer. *Lord my God, your love reaches to heaven; your faithfulness to the clouds.*

The Lord was indeed faithful, for today my bridegroom would come.

Last night, Abba had drunk the cup of wine and signed the marriage contract with Joseph the carpenter. I was betrothed. The home-taking would not be for months yet—after the harvest, Abba had decided. On that day, the men of Nazareth would carry me in a litter through the streets of Nazareth. The wedding party—Joseph’s friends and mine—would walk with us scattering flowers, singing, and playing their flutes and lyres. I would enter Joseph’s home and become his wife.

But today, before the sun set, Joseph would come to this courtyard. We would sit together, under the watchful eyes of my parents. We would speak for the first time and he would share the evening meal with Abba. My insides fluttered like the birds rustling in the branches of the fig tree. Would he be kind? Would we be happy together? What would our lives be like?

I breathed in the scents of our small courtyard. Wisps of smoke rose from the damped cooking fire. The ancient donkey stood like a statue beside his manger, his head bowed low, his eyes closed. Shoots of herbs and onions and tendrils of cucumber vines reached for the morning sun, and flowers opened to the morning warmth. Soon, I would be a wife—with a home to care for, a husband, and children if the Lord willed it. And a garden full of flowers.

The Lord was indeed faithful.

“Mary?” the call came again. I hurried into our little clay house and found Ima rolling the sleeping mats. “There you are, my child.” Her voice caught and my heart wrenched. My mother had been weeping.

I knelt down beside her and put my hands over hers. They were dry, like old parchment, and trembled. “I’ll only be a short walk to the other side of Nazareth.”

"I know, my daughter. Don't mind my foolish tears." Ima's smile creased her wet cheeks.

"If you had a son—" A son would not leave his parents like a daughter did.

She shushed me. "I prayed for years, my sweet daughter, and the Lord gave me my heart's desire. You." Ima brought my hands to her lips and kissed them. "A girl from the Lord's own heart."

"And he gave me the best mother in all of Nazareth . . . in all Galilee." I smiled and took the mats from her arms. "Besides, Ima, I will need to come here often to take care of the garden. My flowers will miss me."

"You and your flowers!" Ima swatted at me with a blanket. "Your husband will have to learn to eat flowers if he wants to be fed."

I laughed at the complaint I'd heard many times, glad to see her sadness lift. "Then you must come and tend my vegetables for me, Ima, or he may just starve."

She shook her head in mock disapproval. "Go now. I know you can't wait to share the news with Alda."

I put away the sleeping mats and scooped up the water jar on my way out the door. Ima was right. I couldn't wait to see my dearest friend. Alda had speculated for months on whom my father would choose for me. I suppose all the women had since I'd come of age. I couldn't wait to tell her it was Joseph.

What would she say, my dear friend who wanted only my happiness?

Would she think he was too old, or would she agree with Abba's choice for me? Her father had chosen an older man for her as well. Benjamin was a good man—although perhaps more outspoken than some thought wise. She had great respect for him and bore two children in just a few years. She could tell me what to expect.



I could hardly keep myself from running through the narrow streets.

At the well in the center of Nazareth, Alda waited her turn with a toddler clinging to her skirts and a baby tucked on her hip. She held out her free arm to embrace me.

“So, you already knew,” I laughed as she pulled me close.

“Of course! News in Nazareth travels faster than a swallow in flight.” She leaned back and smiled. “I wish you joy in your life with Joseph. He is a good man.”

“Thank you, Alda.” I said, relieved to hear her heartfelt words.

“We have much to talk about,” she whispered, but her gaze fell on the other women waiting for water, “but not now.”

Bilhah, the wife of the wine merchant, sidled toward me as her servant girl filled two jars at the well. “Mary,” Bilhah said with a polite nod. “I, too, wish you happiness . . . and pray that your husband is not too old to give you children.”

My smile faltered and my joy dimmed.

“Bilhah!” Alda spoke sharply. “Is Joseph not the most righteous man in all of Nazareth?”

Bilhah shrugged. “He may be righteous, but he is also the oldest man in Nazareth who does not have a wife. Mary could have done better to marry one of my own sons. Even my husband says it.”

I hugged the cool water jar closer to my body. Could there be truth in Bilhah’s words? Joseph’s hair was turning to silver and his back was stooped from years bending over his work. The wife of his youth had died years ago, but he had sons—older than I, and both carpenters like their father. They had gone to Masada to find work on Herod’s enormous fortress. Joseph—at his age—could leave me a widow and childless.

"I'm sure Joachim knows better for his own daughter than you or your husband, Bilhah." Alda admonished. My friend was as bold as she was loyal.

"Of course you are right, Alda," Bilhah raised her chin and looked down her nose. "At least Joseph does not think himself a prophet, telling all of Nazareth of the coming of the Messiah."

Alda winced. Her husband Benjamin did indeed believe—as did some of the rabbis—that the coming of the Promised One was nigh. He spoke of it to everyone in town, at every chance he had.

Bilhah stalked away in a huff, her servant girl laboring behind her.

I shook my head. "Don't mind Bilhah; you know how she is. As they say, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own town.'" I held out my hands for the baby. She came to me with a gurgle and a wet smile.

Alda lowered the gourd into the depths of the well and filled her jar before speaking again. "Perhaps Benjamin is not a prophet, but I believe him." She took back the babe. "The time of our redemption is upon us; even the Pharisees say it." She called to her boy, chasing a lizard in the bushes, and leaned to kiss my cheek. "You will be happy with Joseph, and soon have a child of your own. I know it, no matter what Bilhah says."

I watched her walk away, juggling her jar, her toddler, and the babe and hoped she was right.

At home, after sharing figs and almonds with Ima, I kneeled over the grinding quern, rolling the heavy stone over handfuls of sweet grain. The thump and swoosh of the loom sounded from inside the house, where Ima worked. In the courtyard, the birds twittered and fluttered, the insects hummed, and the scent of roses drifted on the breeze.

My thoughts remained on Alda. Was it really the time of the Lord's promise—when he would send a Messiah

who would lift up the poor, feed the hungry, throw the rulers from their thrones—as the prophets foretold?

The prayer of our people—the prayer on which our hope rested—filled my heart. *When, O Lord, will you send the savior to your people? When will our redeemer come?* And then another question, this one my own. *When you do send us the messiah, how will we know him, Lord?*

A soft chime, like the tinkle of silver bells, sounded over the courtyard. Strangely, it sounded like my name. I looked up, but I was alone. I went back to my grinding.

“Mary.” It *was* my name, in a voice like silver. I stopped my work. The sound changed from bells to the long, low note of the shofar horn that called the faithful to worship at the Temple. “Mary.” A third call. My heart sped up. What could this be?

As I made to rise, the light from the sun dimmed and what looked like a star flared in front of me, so bright I could not look at it. I covered my eyes with my hands and fell to the ground. “I am here.” My words were no more than a whisper over the pounding of my heart.

The call of the horn stopped. No bird or insect buzzed. Even the sound of my own heart ceased. Was I now both deaf and blind? Was I dead? I couldn’t draw a breath for the fear in my soul.

Then, the voice sounded, coming from above and below and inside me. “Rejoice, highly favored one! The Lord is with you.”

The words came not in Aramaic, the language of the land, nor in Hebrew, the language of prayer—but in something else I couldn’t name, yet understood. But what did such a greeting mean? Rejoice? And who was the highly favored one? Surely not me?

The presence waited.

My heart started again, thudding in my chest.