

A woman in a white robe is shown from the side, holding a white cloth that billows out behind her. She is standing in a landscape with rolling hills under a sunset sky. The overall mood is contemplative and spiritual.

*A Transformational  
Journey through the  
Life of Mary*

Wrestling  
*with*  
Wonder

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## CHAPTER ONE Unexpected Interruptions

### *The Angel's Arrival* *Luke 1:26-38*

I approach Mary's life on tiptoe, trembling, because I know I am treading where angels have trod ... and where the church has stomped around for millennia. She has been revered, scorned, and sometimes even deified. And yet, was she really so different from you, from me? Didn't she have similar hopes, similar dreams? A home of her own, a family, maybe even a dog. She was just a young girl from the backwoods of Galilee. A girl with a plan and a heart.

It was a good plan.

It was a good heart.

And the two could not exist together.

Because her God, our God, has dreams of his own, dreams that we can barely imagine. Like you, like me, Mary was called to more. Her God is our God. Her encounters with him more like our own than we might realize.

On one simple, ordinary day, her life was interrupted. Perhaps it happened like this ...

### **MARY TELLS HER STORY**

I am Mary ... on an ordinary day, in an ordinary life, in an ordinary village tucked into the back corners of a region far from the hub of importance. I glance out the kitchen window. Swirls of dust rise and dance from the path outside. Just like every day. Blades

of grass peek between cracks in stone. A bit of wild mustard blooms. And beyond that, an *akanthos* bush, its sharp thorns a symbol of our nation's shame.

The hem of my mother's dress disappears around the corner. She has gone to gather gossip near Nazareth's well. She'll be back soon enough, when the sun tips over the neighbor's rooftop. Meanwhile, I stand here, my fingers sunk deep in warm dough. I press and squeeze, massaging the flour and yeast, thinking about nothing, and everything. I think about the Romans and their oppression of my people. I think about promises made to Israel even before our nation was called from the loins of a single man. I think about the dough in my hands, the bitter herbs on the table behind me. My name means bitter. But I am not my name. I am happy.

I see the neighbor's dog, barking at a lone butterfly. He twirls and shakes his head. I laugh. Maybe I will have a dog when I have a home of my own. When the herbs are mine, the bread my own. My betrothed is out there somewhere even now, working on some table or doorway or cart. Working with strong hands and an honest heart. He is a descendant of the great King David himself. A *tsaddik*. It means righteous. I was blessed to find such a one. And before the year is up, I'll move from my parents' house to his. Then I will go to the well to gather gossip like beads on a string. I will sweep my own home, please my own husband, and bear children who will not be named for bitterness.

I roll the bread and pat it, warm beneath my hands. A rustling sound flutters the air behind me. I turn.

And see him.

A man, but not a man. Like nothing I have ever seen before.

Breath squeezes from me. I cannot speak. Cannot even gasp.

He stands there, in blazing white. Tall and strong. Shining. Extraordinary.  
Terrifying.

And I know he is not a dream, not a vision. Somehow, he is real. And he is here.

The air stills, slows, shimmers around this one who is come from God.

In the silvery silence, he approaches me. He raises a hand.

*Who are you?* The question whispers through my mind, unspoken, chasing a hundred others that are swallowed in his glory. But I need no answer. I have heard of such things. Of such ones.

He is a messenger from God. *In Nazareth?*

He looks at me. Gently, fiercely, his eyes like fire in my soul. And he speaks.

“Be glad.” A common word. Rejoice. An uncommon greeting. And from him, nothing is common at all. Then he says a word I don’t understand. A word that speaks of extraordinary grace. He calls me *Favored One*. Me? Doesn’t he know? I am an ordinary girl, in an ordinary town, on an ordinary day.

But not anymore.

“The Lord is with you.”

And now I am trembling, troubled. What kind of greeting is this? What does he mean?

He says it again.

“Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God.”

Favor? Grace? Here in the kitchen, in Nazareth, a barely betrothed girl with her hands full of dough?

He sees my confusion, my lingering fear. And he whispers a single word: “Behold ...” It is the word for *see*. But what he wants me to see is impossible. He tells me a story so wild, so crazy, that I don’t know what to say, what to think.

He says, “Behold, you will conceive in the womb and will bear a son and you will call the name of him Jesus. This One will be great and the Son of the Most High he will be called and the Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father. And he will rule over the house of Jacob into the ages and of his kingdom there will not be an end!”

It is more than I can comprehend. More than I can see. So, I focus on the one thing, the first thing. The impossible. “How will this be? I’m a virgin.”

And then comes the wildest part of all. He doesn’t speak of men. He speaks of miracles. He tells me the Holy Spirit himself will come upon me and God’s power will overshadow me. Me! A simple girl from a backwater town filled with dirt and thistles and the occasional butterfly. Doesn’t he see the dust outside the window, the limp blades of grass struggling just to survive, the simple sunlight, the ordinary mustard plants?

“Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”

An incredible plan. An astounding promise. I cannot fathom that he speaks to me. Because it is more than a plan. More than a promise. It is a call. A question. Will I leave all my plans, all my hopes, behind me? Will I set my simple dreams aside? I will not have a dog. I may not ever sweep my own home, bake my own bread. Will I say yes to this shining messenger of God? Will I lay aside my ordinary life to embrace this vision of something new, something impossible, beyond anything I ever imagined?

He is talking again. About Elizabeth now. About the barren one having a son in her old age. We’d prayed for years, made whispered pleas at the temple. Elizabeth ...

becoming a counterpoint to my call. The virgin giving birth alongside the barren one with child.

“Nothing is impossible with God.”

Nothing.

Do I dare believe it? Do I dare say yes? I know what it means. Nothing will be the same again. No one will understand. How will anyone else believe? Can I bear the shame? Can I bear the disbelief? And more, can I bear the beauty? And the wonder?

And in this ordinary moment, on an ordinary day, in an ordinary life, I feel the heavens waiting, breathless.

Will I say yes?

“I am the Lord’s servant.” I exhale the words. I am his slave, his maidservant, his own creation. “May it be done to me according to what you’ve said.” And so, I accept. I surrender. Not knowing what it means, these words I say, but knowing that I mean them. And knowing that YHWH himself hears.

My shining messenger smiles.

I tremble.

Then he is gone. And with him, everything I ever thought my life would be ...

### **A JOURNEY INTO WILDNESS AND WONDER**

That’s how it is with this beyond-our-expectations, out-of-the-box God. We encounter him and nothing is ever the same again. He comes to us, he calls us to a new vision, a new way, a new dream. He breaks into our ordinary lives with a call to more than we can imagine.

And if we accept the call, if we choose to be his handmaiden, then nothing is the same again. Life becomes a crazy, wild ride with Jesus, who is not the tame, safe God that we expect him to be.

Just like Mary, my personal journey into wildness and wonder began with an interruption, a call, and a surrender.

### **An Interruption**

I remember the day that God first broke into my life, interrupting my ordinary with a glimpse of wonder beyond my wildest dreams. For me, it happened in a dorm room at Stanford University. I lay on my ruffled bed with chemistry books scattered among great works of Western culture. A thin tome by Bernard of Clairvaux, a fat text with selected works from Martin Luther, a black paperback of the Confessions of Augustine. Chemistry and Confessions and Clairvaux ... and midterms the next day. I stared out the window and followed the dance of dead leaves over the brick walkway outside. I heard the rustle of them through the slightly opened pane. And then it came. An inaudible whisper. A flutter in my soul.

*I love you.*

God?

And then came the tiniest glimpse in my heart of a love like I'd never seen, never experienced before. Sweet and piercing. Like the quiet whisper of a relentless wind. Like the powerful pull of the ocean's tide. Like deep, rumbling laughter. Like thunder across the sky.

God loved me.

With a love that broke me. Restored me.

Called me to more.

To surrender.

So there, among books and papers and pencils chewed to a nub, I accepted the call of love. I gave my life to the One who loved me with *that* kind of love.

*I am yours, God. May it be to me as you want ...*

I didn't speak those words exactly, but it was what I meant, an echo of a girl who had encountered God millennia before me.

And like her, I knew some of what it meant to say those words. For me, it meant a new major (in chemistry, of all things!), digging deep into the Bible with friends, choosing worship over achievement. But, in truth, I had no idea what I was really getting myself into. I didn't see years of infertility, miscarriage, disappointments, and doubts. I didn't see failures in ministries, family and friends who didn't understand, confusion and darkness.

All I knew was that he loved me, and I was his. And that changed everything. I'd been called. Called out of my ordinary life, with my ordinary plans. Called to something more.

More wondrous? Yes. But also more painful, more confusing, more wild and unexpected than I could have ever imagined.

Because that's what it means to follow him. It means your plans are no longer your own. Your life itself belongs to him.

## **A Call**



Just like me, Mary, too, was interrupted by a call to more. And what a calling!

It begins with an unexpected interruption in an ordinary, well-planned life.

Scholars believe that Mary was twelve to fourteen years old, which was the traditional age for betrothed girls of the time. Once betrothed, a girl was considered legally (but not domestically) married. She lived in her father's house for about a year to prepare before being taken to her husband's home to begin a normal married life.

So there was Mary, a regular Jewish girl, betrothed, waiting for the rest of her life to begin. Waiting, and planning, and hoping. She was going to marry a carpenter, move to his house, raise a family in the out-of-the-way town of Nazareth, and be a good woman.

According to one commentator, "For all indicators, her life would not be extraordinary. She would marry humbly, give birth to numerous poor children, never travel farther than a few miles from home, and one day die like thousands of others before her—a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere."<sup>1</sup>

But then came the call.

In that ordinary home, ordinary life, a messenger appears. God breaks in with his glory.

And his first call is to joy! He begins with the word *chairo*, which is not a common greeting. It is a word that means rejoice, be glad, be filled with joy. It shares a root with the Greek word for grace.

The angel comes not with a call to submit, to repent, or even with a call to duty. But rather, the first call is to rejoice in the interruption of God breaking in.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke, Volume One, That You May Know the Truth, Preaching the Word Series* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), 30.

And that makes me want to dance. Because I believe that God comes to each of us and his first call is to joy. Think of what that means. He comes to you, to me, in the ordinary places of life. In the kitchens and laundry rooms, in the workrooms and classrooms, in the living rooms and offices and cars and shopping aisles. And he doesn't say, "You must, you should have, you didn't, you did, you-you-you." Instead, he whispers of joy, woos us with a grace which we don't deserve. Joy becomes his common, uncommon greeting to us as well. To receive his call, to see and be glad. But the only way we can do that is if we are holding our own plans loosely. We cannot approach our lives, our days, or even our moments with a tight-fisted grip on what we think ought-to-be. We must rejoice in the interruptions. We must let go of our self-focus so we can receive his joy. That is our first call.

But where do we find this uncommon joy?

The angel Gabriel points to two places:

- God's favor
- God's presence

He says, "Rejoice, the one having been favored" (Luke 1:28, *translation mine*). Favored one. What does it mean? Is it more than "the one God likes for the moment" or "the one God has plucked out of the crowd ... for now"? Yes! But you can't see it in the English. To glimpse the wonder of God's promise here, we must take a look at the word in the original Greek, or more precisely, the tense of the word. Because you see, in the Greek, the word for favored one is in the perfect tense.

I love the perfect tense because we don't have that tense in English, so I know that when the New Testament writers use it, God has given us something deeper,

something more we can discover by looking at the original text. In the Greek, the perfect tense is used to indicate something that has been completed and perfected in the past—it's already done, finished, perfect, unchanging. But it's not over. Rather, in its perfected, completed state, it has effects that continue on in that same perfected state through eternity. The effects don't end or diminish or wear out. They are established forever. When Jesus said "It is finished" (John 19:30) and gave up his spirit on the cross, he used this tense.

And that is something beautiful. Because it means God's favor for Mary, and for us, doesn't depend on us. It has been perfectly established already, and we can live in it today, tomorrow, forever. It is finished, complete.

That's not all. The word tense is also passive, again emphasizing that Mary has done nothing or will do nothing to earn God's favor. It has already been given freely to her by his grace. She wasn't favored because she was super-spiritual or extra-holy or ultra-faithful. "Indeed, she is not introduced in any way that would recommend her to us as particularly noteworthy or deserving of divine favor," says commentator Joel Green.<sup>2</sup> She was just a virgin betrothed to a guy named Joseph. But she was favored, graced. Why?

Gabriel gives the reason immediately: "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). He is with you, too.

Ponder that for a moment. Soak in an understanding of favor, of grace, that is based on him and his presence, not on us and our doings. Not on our accomplishments, our possessions, our positions, our successes, or even our work in his kingdom. That's

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<sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 86.

what God offers us: A call to grace and joy, a statement of who we are in God (his favored one), and a reminder of his presence.

We are ordinary. He makes us extraordinary. Because of grace.

Because of his presence with us. The angel comes not with a normal, traditional greeting, but rather with one that confounded even early church theologians. Origen, from the late second and early third century writes, “The angel greeted Mary with a new address, which I could not find anywhere else in Scripture!”<sup>3</sup> Because the greeting doesn’t say “hello” but rather is one that announces the wondrous presence of God himself. And that’s what God’s favor is all about. You don’t walk alone. Not through the difficulties, not through the blessings, not even through the ordinary moments that may seem devoid of anything that matters. It *all* matters now, because God is with you. Always. In every moment. With his favor.

Yet, for Mary, and so often for us, this is a very perplexing greeting, a very strange call. It is both wondrous and scary. Wondrous because God has broken into the ordinary and made it extraordinary. Scary because it means Mary’s plans, and our plans, don’t matter any more.

Then comes the second call in Mary’s life, and in ours: “Fear not!” Don’t let fear stop you, don’t let it be your response to God. Don’t turn away and hide! Why? Because, again, you have found not judgment, not condemnation, not indifference, but favor from God.

So, what is this favor really? What does God’s presence with us mean? For Mary, and often for us, it means a new dream, a new plan, a new life. One that we may not

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur A. Just Jr., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 14.

understand yet. One that may seem strange and impossible, that will promise discomfort as much as success. One that will most likely upend our lives!

But that's what God's favor, what his dynamic presence, really means. It means a call out of the ordinary into the extraordinary. It means the Savior himself comes into our lives.

To Mary, it must have seemed crazy. R. Kent Hughes explains it this way: "She understood the gist of the angel's announcement: 'You are going to become *pregnant*; you are going to call your son's name *Salvation*, he is going to be the *Son of God*; and he will be *the Messiah*.' What an earful! What an incredible heartfelt!"<sup>4</sup>

God's plans for us may seem crazy too. It may seem that what he calls us to is impossible. It is always impossible. So, like Mary, we may ask: How will this be? Not "Will this really be?" But "*How* will it be?" How will God accomplish his purposes in our lives?

He answers us the same way he answered Mary: by the Holy Spirit. Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 35). You see, there's something mysterious, something beyond us, in this call to be his. There's something about his overshadowing power that makes the impossible more than possible. And that makes the results holy. Gabriel says, "The One being born will be called holy" (v. 35, *translation mine*). What is born from the Holy Spirit, from God's power in our lives, is holy.

The life that comes when we receive God's call is no longer ordinary. Instead, that life is holy. Your everyday, in-and-out, laundry-room life is holy.

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Luke*, 34.

That's what it means to follow God—to open your life to the unexpected Christ. It means encountering him in the ordinary and finding that life has become extraordinary. It means the impossible thing is real. It means taking a step into wonder ... because life is now holy.

But how can we know it's true? How can we trust? We just have to look around. Gabriel points to Mary's relative, Elizabeth, once barren and now pregnant. See, he says, God has done the impossible before. He's doing it now in the life of someone close to you.

It is the same for us. Look around you. See the lives of people he's changed. See the footprints of God's power in places where hope seemed dead.

And see them in all God has done in the past as well. "For no word from God will ever fail," Gabriel says (v.37), echoing the words of the angel to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:14: "Is anything too hard for the LORD." God kept his promise to a long-barren couple and the nation of Israel was born. He will keep his promise to Mary as well. And to you. And me.

And Christ will be born in our lives, in our circumstances, in our everyday encounters. Because Gabriel literally says, "For *every word* will not be impossible with God." That means everything God says, everything he plans, everything he dreams, is now possible. Even a nation being born from a barren woman. Even a young virgin giving birth to the savior of the world in a backwoods, out-of-the-way village in Galilee. Even God transforming your everyday, sometimes-boring, sometimes messed-up, sometimes-confusing and frustrating and doubting and imperfect life into something amazing, for his glory.

God has revealed himself to Mary, and also to us. He is the God of the impossible, he always has been. He is the God who calls us to joy, to abandon fear, to release our dreams to embrace his.

### **A Surrender**

So what will be our answer? Mary's was a resounding, "Yes!" "I am the Lord's slave," she said. "May it be done to me according to your word." (v. 38, *translation mine*). She proclaimed herself fully belonging to God—his slave, his servant, his handmaiden, one with no rights of her own, no separate life, no eight-to-five job and the rest of her time was her own. She chose to be a person who fully, wholly, belonged to her Master.

She surrendered. And she didn't need great understanding, or to have everything all figured out, or to see God's plan from beginning to end. She had no idea what her surrender would really mean. She didn't know it would lead to a manger, to a cross. But she did know that God called her to lay down her dreams, her plans, in order to embrace his. And she knew there would be a cost.

After all, she was betrothed to Joseph. She must have expected him to react badly. Matthew tells that Joseph did think of divorcing her (Matt. 1:19). And even though the death penalty for adultery described in Deuteronomy 22:23 seems not to have been carried out often, she still could have been stoned. Mary knew that a "yes" would mean suffering, and might even bring death. But she said it anyway. She let go of her grip on her own dreams and expectations of life. And she embraced God's instead.

Will you? Will I? Not just once. Not just in a kitchen or a church service, at camp or in a living room with friends. But every day. Every hour. Will we be willing to let go of our “Josephs,” our houses on the knoll, our orderly lives and dreams and goals? Or will we cling to our own “house”—our own dreams of family, success, and how life ought to be? The call is to lay those aside and instead identify with God’s household, be his slave, accept a new adventure, accept the favor of his presence. Rejoice.

*Rejoice?*

That our dreams are endangered? That we maybe won’t get the life we planned for, the life we always wanted?

Rejoice?

Yes.

And surrender.

Because you are highly favored. God is with you.

And that changes everything.

Can you accept it?

### **WHO IS THIS GOD?**

But I accepted Christ years ago, you may say. What does this have to do with me?

Everything.

Because I think God often breaks into our ordinary, everyday lives with a call to more. It may be in the kitchen, in the classroom, in the office, or even in the laundry room. And there he is, interrupting our lives with a greater vision, a deeper call. Wooing us to wonder with an impossible dream. With his dream, and not ours.



Because *he* is with us.

So, we must ask: Who is this God? Who is he who interrupts our lives with a call to the impossible?

He is the Dream Taker and the Dream Maker.

### **The Dream Taker**

“Follow your dreams!” says the world.

“Die to self,” says God. “Die to your plans, your dreams, your tight-fisted grip on what your life should be.”

“You can do anything you set your mind to!” says the world.

“I am God, you are not,” says God. “Submit to me, and together we will do everything *I* set *my* mind to.”

“Be somebody!” says the world. “Accomplish, achieve, fight your way to the top!”

“Be mine,” says God. “Stop striving and instead rest in my plans for you. Will you be my handmaiden?”

### **The Dream Maker**

Meditate on these verses. Hear in them God’s call to you:

- “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart”

(Psalm 37:4). Not “Take delight in the Lord and he will do whatever you

want.” Instead, he will give you the desires themselves—new desires, new dreams, his dreams for you. His dreams will become yours!

- “For we are God’s masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has already prepared for us to walk around in” (Eph. 2:10, *translation mine*). He has already favored us with a plan and a call. It’s all prepared. You just have to let go and step forward.
- “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 29:11, *emphasis mine*). And they aren’t our plans. They aren’t our dreams. They aren’t our carefully scripted ideas for what our lives should be. Instead, they are a call to the impossible—to loss, confusion, difficulty, misunderstandings, ridicule ... and ultimately to wonder.

So in the great calls, and in the small: Rejoice, fear not, and submit. Whisper to God, “Let it be to me as you have said.”

Do you dare? Mary did. And so the adventure began ... an adventure that would look nothing like her expectations. She would enter a life that at every turn seemed to go awry, where nothing would make sense, where doubt and confusion, pain and fear were her companions, where the Son of God himself would seem to have lost his mind.

But she would find him on the journey and become who she was always meant to be.

What about me? What about you?

Do you long for your own wild and wondrous adventure with an unexpected God who does the impossible in ways we never imagined? If so, let go! Open your white-

knuckled fingers wrapped around your ordinary plans. Accept the wild, crazy gift of a call that will defy all your expectations.

Because once you say yes, you will embark on a journey where nothing is as it seems, nothing happens as expected. A journey that will lead to the foot of a cross ...

So ...

Rejoice ...

Fear Not ...

Submit ...

Do you dare?

If so, turn the page, and hang on . . .