

Borne in Perplexity

Luke 1:26-38

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You notice, that at the end of this extraordinary dialogue between Mary and the angel, she is restrained in how she describes her emotional state, in what she commits to. Having offered herself up in service to the Lord, having said “Let it be with me according to your word,” she does not go on to say this: “Oh, yes. And now I understand everything.”

No, the passage does not ever downplay the fact that Mary is perplexed, and that Christ’s conception is downright confusing, even to his mother. Why, Mary is perplexed even before the angel tells her that she is pregnant: “And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” So Mary is perplexed from the moment that the angel first greets her.

I am reminded of the popular line from the movie *Jerry Maguire*, when the lady he is declaring his love to finally responds to his lengthy speech to inform him, “You had me at ‘hello.’” Except that Mary might have concluded this whole dialogue with the angel a bit differently: “You perplexed me at ‘hello.’” She begins, and I would say concludes, this scene thoroughly and totally perplexed, from hello to goodbye.

As one who spends much of life in such a state, I take comfort. I see this passage as a great anthem, a symphony, in honor of those of us who move forward not in clarity, not in certainty, not in single-mindedness, but with perplexity. We’re the ones at the back of the orchestra, hoping but doubting we’re in the right place, playing with gusto nonetheless.

For perplexity, as a state of mind, is hugely underrated in our surefooted society. Think about what we want in a leader these days. We want someone who knows what he wants, is clear on what she thinks, makes a decision and makes it quickly. Think how strange it would be to hear a news anchor describe the president as confused. Imagine it. “In his radio address to the nation this week, the president, when looking at the state of the nation, the state of the world, the attacks from opposing political parties as well as various natural disasters and diseases facing the world had this response: “Quite frankly, I am perplexed.”

But sometimes I wish we could hear that. For there’s a news flash right here in the Bible: that the most important woman in the world, the one who is about to give birth to the son of God, the one who will have to tell her beloved news of a pregnancy that will bring scandal to their new life, the one who will sit at the foot of the cross heroically suffering her son into eternity, the one who now as young girl will have to have the strength to travel long distances in miles and even greater distances in faith, begins her adventure *in a state of perplexity*. From the moment the angel greets her, she is confused.

To me, that’s enormously freeing. I think people of faith should rejoice in it. I don’t mean to make too much of this one narrative detail, but imagine how the story changes if you had Mary adding a few upbeat, clarifying remarks like this at the end: “Thanks

for the update, Gabe. Consider me up-to-date and informed. I'm moving ahead with total clarity. But I expect to be kept in the loop on any upcoming developments. I'll take it from here." Imagine how the cocky bravado of office chatter would change the story.

Instead, in a much richer story, our hero makes no claim to understand it; there is no surefooted statement to sum it all up. Mary makes no comment to indicate the confusion and perplexity have lifted at all. She simply offers herself up to God, just as she is; confusion, perplexity and all. Because apparently, when it comes to leaders of God's revolution here on earth, a little perplexity and confusion is exactly what God is looking for. But in a world that wants answers, and wants them now, can we believe in a God who can live with our questions?

So often in the life of the church, we look around from pew to pew and wonder, "Is everybody else here getting something that I don't get?" Never mind the simple Sunday morning logistical issues of when you are supposed to stand up and when are you supposed to sit down, or whether or not you are supposed to clap, how you are supposed to know which book to open when in the service or where you are supposed to park. The confusion there is obvious, and usually the answers, while not obvious, can be rooted out over time.

But isn't there a deeper inner confusion we feel? A worry that perhaps everyone gets something we don't. We sit in church, looking at our neighbors, and we're wondering, "Do they ever question any of this stuff? Because I sure do." And then in another seat up the aisle, someone else might be wondering, "Does everyone question this stuff except for me? And if my faith is steady, does that make me question-impaired? Perhaps in my lack of confusion, I'm confused...." But then we all sit up straight, open our worship bulletins decisively and with a churchy certainty, to look as though we are people who are *not* perplexed.

To which I would like to offer this small comfort: If the mother of God got to be perplexed, you can be, too. In fact, let's take perplexity out of the old broom closet, dust it off, shine it up, and put it out on the mantelpiece in the middle of the ecclesiological living room, because a little perplexity can be a wonderful thing in the life of faith. For that matter, let's stop whitewashing Mary into some paragon of girlish obedience, and see her instead as the complicated woman she was, a person of complexity, a person of perplexity. How could she be anything else?

Given that Mary found herself in conversation with an angel who was telling her that as a virgin, she would give birth to the Son of Man, we can presume that her questions were both big and substantial. We ought to delight that the scripture doesn't downplay that, but tells us up front that she's perplexed and then does not wipe that away. As the conversation continues, she remains perplexed, asking, "How can it be?" just like we would. And even in her perplexity, God doesn't drop her. Rather, God chooses her.

Two thousand years later, we sit here in Advent waiting for the birth of a baby who has already been born, waiting for the Son of God who reverses life, death, and reshapes time itself. And every now and then we, too, are perplexed. We ask our angels, "How can it be?" And God doesn't drop us either.

It almost makes you wonder: could God be out there looking for the perplexed? For why not take a minute to imagine what Mary would have been if she had not been perplexed when greeted by an angel. Without perplexity, Mary would have to have

been one of three things: unaware, a “know-it-all,” or simply not a good choice for God’s plan.

First, if the scripture had not indicated to us that she was confused by all of this, we’d have to ask ourselves: Did she even realize she was talking to an angel? Did she hear what the angel was saying? Did she get it? Her perplexity tells us, as the readers two thousand years later, that she grasped the divine magnitude of it all. She understood enough to understand that she did not understand.

If that makes sense. Which it doesn’t. Which it shouldn’t. Which is my point.

But secondly, if Mary had not been perplexed, and the gospel writer had not been kind enough to include this detail, we would have been left thinking Mary was a “know-it-all.” And nobody likes a “know-it-all.” If Mary had responded to the angel with a bored “So here you finally are,” or with a knowing wink, we would be left annoyed that God would choose some spiritual “know-it-all,” instead of a real person, who, in the face of divine mystery, is as confused as the rest of us.

And lastly, without her perplexity, Mary would not have been a solid choice for mother of God, because if you’re going on that kind of adventure, you had better have a sense of confusion, wonder, questioning, and perplexity, or you won’t make it.

Because this was not a journey for the “smartest kid in the class,” or the “answer guy” at work, or the “know-it-all” who cuts off all ideas with the answers at every meeting. This was a job. Rather, this was a calling, for a person whose spirit was open. Wide open. Perplexity leaves the spirit open to be touched by God.

Sometimes, it’s in admitting we don’t have all the answers, that suddenly we can hear a whisper from another place. Sometimes, in admitting that we don’t get it, we open ourselves up to get something from God. Sometimes when we stop talking and stop giving ourselves the answers to our own questions, we allow ourselves to be filled up with something new. With Jesus even. Who chose someone who was confused to bring him into this world.

I’m guessing that your questions can’t be bigger than Mary’s. I’m guessing that when she said, “How can it be...” she was still more confused than I’ll ever be. Look at what she had just heard. If Jesus could live in someone who had questions like that, surely he can live in you, too.

It turns out, that in the end, in order to be part of God’s plan, you don’t actually have to understand it all. But you could take a second look at a confused teenage girl who in the face of a divine dilemma and a perplexing pregnancy could still say this: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”