

Today let us wait on God: not waiting as if for a bus that we can just sit on and stare out of the windows; but waiting as if for a teacher whose help is going to get us through our next task and into a new world. Let us listen in anticipation, and strain to catch God's every word.

Sing or Read:

- 1 Light a candle in a darkened place,
in its flame see hope on every face,
Christ our Saviour will be born,
heralding a brand new dawn,
so let it burn.
- 2 In the darkness, see the coming light,
Word of God speaks through the darkest night,
keep a watch, the time is near,
time for hope and not for fear,
so let it burn.
- 3 Stepping through each page of history,
prophets contemplate this mystery,
celebrate the coming King,
words of joy and hope they bring,
so let it burn.
- 4 In the desert now the waiting's done,
make things ready for your King, says John,
see, his glory is revealed,
and the hope for all is sealed,
so let it burn.
- 5 Mary found true favour with the Lord,
yet she trembled at his strange reward,
knew this was the special One,
hope for many through God's Son,
so let it burn.

Clare Stainsby (b. 1959) Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Word Edition, number 174 Words and Music: © 1996, 2002 Clare Stainsby

Luke 1:26-38:

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

Sing or Read:

- 1 The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame ;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria !
- 2 'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold ;
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria !
- 3 Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name : '
most highly favoured lady.
Gloria !
- 4 Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
'Most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria !

Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924) Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 187

Reflection:

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth” “In the sixth month” ties Mary’s story to that of Elizabeth, for whom “this is the sixth month” of pregnancy with the baby who will be known as John the Baptist (v. 36). John will be born six months before Jesus and will be the forerunner of Jesus—the one who prepares the way for Jesus by calling Israel to repentance and baptism (3:1-18). The angel Gabriel is the same angel who announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband (1:19)—another connection between the two stories.

The angel’s appearance to Mary in Nazareth is starkly different to the same angel’s earlier appearance to Zechariah. The appearance to Zechariah took place in the Jerusalem temple, where Zechariah was serving as a priest, so it was to a holy man in a holy place. The appearance to Mary takes place in Nazareth, an insignificant town far removed from Jerusalem and the temple. It involves Mary, a young woman of no standing or importance. It is remarkable that, in this patriarchal society, Mary is front-and-centre in this story. Girls are often betrothed at an incredibly young age, so she is possibly in her early teens. Young women are expected to be seen, but not heard.

The angel’s promise reminds us of God’s words to Moses at the burning bush, “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12)—and the angel who said to Gideon, “The Lord is with you” (Judges 6:12)—and the Lord’s promise to Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid because of them; for I am with you to deliver you” (Jeremiah 1:8),

Mary must be puzzled as much by the appearance of the angel/messenger as by his words. In her not-very-large town, she would not often see an unfamiliar person, much less have them appear unexpectedly and address her directly.

Mary is further mystified by Gabriel’s words: “you favoured one!” Still incredibly young, in a world that reveres age and wisdom. A nobody in a nowhere town. God has not prepared her for the appearance of the angel, but instead sends the angel to prepare her for an even greater surprise.

Mary is told: “Don’t be afraid, Mary.” Zechariah was afraid of the angel (1:12), and these words suggest that Mary is afraid too. Shortly, we will see terrified shepherds in the presence of their angel (2:9-10). Fear is appropriate in God’s presence, but time and again we are told ‘not to be afraid.’

Mary is not chosen because she deserves favour but is favoured because she has been chosen. As Jesus will later say, in God’s realm the last will be first and the first will be last (13:30).

God could have chosen the temple in Jerusalem as the site for this announcement but did not. Nazareth is a smaller and more ordinary town. God chooses a lowly person in a lowly place to contrast with the glory of the Son of the Most High, who will “reign over the house of Jacob forever.”

All this is Good News, of course. God is making provision for the salvation of his people. The Good News is that God has a place and plan for every person—even the ordinary person—especially the ordinary person.

In most cases, we are acutely aware of the ordinariness of our lives. In many cases, our work for God seems ordinary. Maybe we are called to hand out church notices, welcoming at the church door. In life without lockdown, we may have helped with church coffee, lunches, visiting. You may have led youth groups or sung in the choir, play music, making sure the AV works, or you may take care of the property. Sometimes our calling is hard: the youth group might be unruly, or in the choir someone sings off key, or someone grumbles about the sound system or the church heating and we wonder why we bother. The reality is that each

task, low or high, fits into God's scheme of things in ways that we cannot yet understand. It matters less that we carry out our tasks with expertise than that we approach them with devotion. God desires, not the skill of our hands, but the love of our hearts. The person who has only the ability to love God and neighbour is all-important in God's Kingdom. But we must also acknowledge that favour with God is a two-edged sword. God offers mercy but no life of ease. For Mary, God's favour didn't bring prosperity or comfort. Instead, she conceived a child before she was married, fled to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous plan, and saw her son die on a cross.

This is truly Gospel: Good News for those of us who find ourselves in impossible situations. We talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place. We know how it feels to be in an untenable situation with no exit—trapped. As I write this message, there is uncertainty regarding the celebrations of Christmas. Some people have already chosen not to see family and friends. Others are making plan to meet in 'bubbles' but there is still doubt as to whether this will be possible or even a good idea if it can go ahead. It may be a sacrifice we need to make for the greater good. However, as we walk with the Lord, no situation is beyond redemption.

The New Testament provides only fleeting glances at Mary as the story progresses. Hers will not be a comfortable journey. On one occasion she and her other sons will find themselves standing on the outside seeking to see Jesus, and he seems to refuse their approach (Luke 8:19-21). She will witness Jesus' death on a cross (John 19:25-27). Never will she escape her calling. She models the kind of faithfulness that all of us will do well to copy.

Let us pray:

Lord, for all who find it hard to be joyful on this day, we pray.

Be with the sick, at home or in hospital,

and those giving birth right now, strengthen and bless those who care for them.

We pray for light in dark places. **Lord, bring light.**

Comfort those who are missing someone today,

whether through bereavement, broken relationships, or simple absence.

Give shelter and a welcome to the homeless, and may those who offer it be blessed.

We pray for light in dark places. **Lord, bring light.**

Give hope and a safe haven to refugees and all who have been displaced by war, flood, famine or other calamity.

We pray for light in dark places. **Lord, bring light.**

In the name of the child of Bethlehem, who himself was homeless and a refugee, we ask these things. **Amen.**

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.**

Sing or read:

- 1 Joy to the world, the Lord is come !
Let earth receive her King ;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.
- 2 Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns !
Let all their songs employ ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
- 3 He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Isaac Watts (1674–1748) Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 330

**Sometimes I say yes,
and sometimes I say maybe,
and sometimes I say no,
and sometimes I am too distracted
to know what I'm being asked.
Help me, O God of time,
to find and make time for all the demands
that come my way,
so that I might say yes with joy,
when I can. Amen.**

The Blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, be with you, with those you love and with those you ought to love this day and forever more. Amen

