

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE BLESSED

In her book, *Better Than Before: What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits*, Gretchen Rubin called **habits** "the invisible architecture of daily life."



We repeat about 40 percent of our behavior almost daily, so our habits shape our existence, and our future."

Gretchen Rubin explains that habits reduce the need for self-control, saying, "With habits, we conserve our self-control."



Because we're in the habit of putting a dirty coffee cup in the dishwasher, or simply washing the cup

when we're through we don't need self-control to perform that action; we do it without thinking." She also added, "Our habits are our **destiny**. And **changing** our habits allows us to **alter** that **destiny**."



I agree with all that. Our **habits** become our **paths** that move us through life. Our **habits** are critical to *shaping* the course of our lives. The question is never: "**Do I have a habit?**"

Of course you *have* habits. *If* at least 40 percent of what you do each day is *some* form of repetition, *then* the question is always: "*What **kind** of habits do I have?*"



Do *my habits* ADD value to my life? Do *my habits* TAKE value from my life?

Do *my* habits enable me to grow, to develop, to mature, to deepen as a person? Do *my* habits hobble me: I become stagnant; I become rigid; I become less curious and, frankly, less engaged; I rarely venture beyond what is comfortable and familiar.

We all *have* habits. I like a neat and organized life. I don't apologize for liking a neat and organized life. It works for me. I thrive with routine. I'm wearing a button-down collar shirt today because I like it. I don't care if you like it. You don't have to like it. I'm wearing it. I like it.

I know what my habits are. Do you know what your habits are? And if you say, "*I don't have habits.*" Then ...**that's** your habit.

Now ...the whole purpose behind habits and behind routines is ... hopefully ... to live a better, life.

But what do you do when *your* habits of life; when *your* expectations about the routines that shape *your* life are ... broken?

I ran across this quote from **Ben Patterson**: "God must reserve for Himself the **right** of the initiative, the **right** to break into my life without question or explanation.



That shattering phone call, that disturbing letter, ... may indeed be the first stage of God's interruption in my life. ... Since God does the initiating, He *must be* responsible for the consequences.

Scripture does teach this.

CONSIDER GOD'S INITIATIVE with **Job**. *It is God* who says to Satan: "*Have you considered my servant Job?*"

CONSIDER GOD'S INITIATIVE with **Moses**. *It is God* who caused the bush to be burned and captured the attention of Moses.

CONSIDER GOD'S INITIATIVE with the **Old Testament prophets**. I often wonder about the **Old Testament prophets**:

- the vision of **Obadiah**
- the word of the Lord that came to **Joel**
- the word of the Lord that came to **Hosea**
- the oracle that **Habakkuk** the prophet saw

Always the initiative of God. Always God coming to them. And their lives were never the same.

WHATEVER routine expectations that **Job** had: **Job**, who was a moral exemplar; **Job** the man of righteous habits.

WHATEVER routine expectation of life, that **Moses** had: **Moses**, once an Egyptian prince, now a Bedouin shepherd; **Moses**, the man already in his 80's

WHATEVER the routine expectations of **all the prophets**. WHATEVER they were: *their habits and routines*: God changed them. God upended them.



So **CONSIDER GOD'S INITIATIVE** on this day, with young **Mary**, the Galilean maiden. *It is All God's initiative.*

Who are the 15, or 16, or 17 year old girls that you know in your life? Is this the age of your daughter? Your granddaughter? Have you taught a girl this age in Bible class?

Think of what you know of them. What are their interests? What kinds of things are important to them?

Are they still learning self-confidence? Can they hold your eye when you look at them and when you speak to them? Are they self-conscious about their own changing bodies?

Are they easily embarrassed? Do they seek attention or are they more likely to avoid attention? You know they feel uncomfortable when they become the center of attention.

Why would young **Mary** in our text, in her time, *be* fundamentally different as a 15, 16, or 17 year old girl in her culture;

why would young **Mary** *be different* from any of the girls of that age that you know as you would consider them in our time, in our culture?

Ant that's precisely the point: **Mary** was **not** fundamentally different. She was a virgin betrothed to a man in her Galilean hometown of Nazareth.



That – itself – automatically makes **Mary** really normal in her culture.

You've seen plenty of young **Mary's** walking behind their mothers at Walmart in Macedon, or getting off the bus, or waiting in the early morning darkness to get on the school bus.

Mary was utterly normal. **Mary** wasn't looking to stand out. **Mary** wasn't looking to be different. In fact, being different, in **Mary's** culture was even more awkward, and potentially dangerous, than being different ... today. **Mary** wasn't different.

I see **Mary** as quite compliant. **Mary** was following the expected path of life for a girl in her culture. All

of this ... stuff that has accrued, that has glommed on to **Mary** over the centuries about how "special" **Mary** was even before the angel greets her: all that ... stuff is just ... unfounded speculation; and really not very helpful.

I ran across a story. 5-year-old **Olivia**, and her best friend, 5-year-old **Claire**, had parts in their kindergarten nativity play. **Claire** was ... Mary. **Olivia** was ... an angel.

Before the big show a **young boy**, *another member of the cast*, was making the rounds to each child in the dressing room. "**I'm a sheep, what are you?**" Each child responded politely.

When he asked **Olivia** she proudly declared. "**I'm an angel.**" The little boy then turned to **Claire**.

At that moment, **Claire** was ... struggling to get into her costume. To be more precise, **Claire's mother** was struggling with **Claire** to get **Claire** into her costume.

The little boy: "**I'm a sheep, what are you?**" **Claire**, exasperated, simply said, "**I'm Mary.**"

Realizing he was now face to face with a lead character, in the big show, the little boy now felt compelled to justify his own role. "**It's hard being a sheep, you know,**" he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor playing a very big part.

5-year-old **Claire**, mother tugging at her costume, was equally serious in her dead-pan response, but ... probably more profound: "**Yes, I know. "But it's also hard being a virgin, you know."**

Mary was no different. **Mary** was an ordinary young woman. **Mary's** life had a familiar future: **Mary** knew what was coming next in her life.

There would be the wedding with **Joseph**. It was to be expected that within one or two, at most three years, **Mary** would produce children, and then **Mary's** life would be totally defined thereafter by her domestic responsibilities. This was normal and familiar. This was safe.



Mary herself had seen this same trajectory of life take shape in the lives of ALL the other females she knew. No exception. Girls, *especially girls*, who WERE different **FROM** that norm simply didn't last very long inside the normal social culture of **Mary's** day.

We can think whatever we may want to think ... today, about how confining or how limiting those social boundaries and those social expectations were for young **Mary**, in young **Mary's** day.

But IF **Mary** was at ALL normal, THEN it never even crossed **Mary's** mind for her to EVEN consider that there MIGHT be a different way FOR **Mary** to look at her life; at what she COULD expect from her life.



And it is in THAT moment of unobtrusive, unobserved normality ... that **GOD TAKES THE INITIATIVE** to interrupt **Mary's** life.

The angel **Gabriel** sent from God: "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

This was not an **Oprah** moment for **Mary**: "*You get car! You get a car! You get a car!*"

Gabriel's appearance was no ANSWER to **Mary's** prayer. **Mary** had NOT been praying: "*God use me to be the vessel for the birth of your Messiah.*"

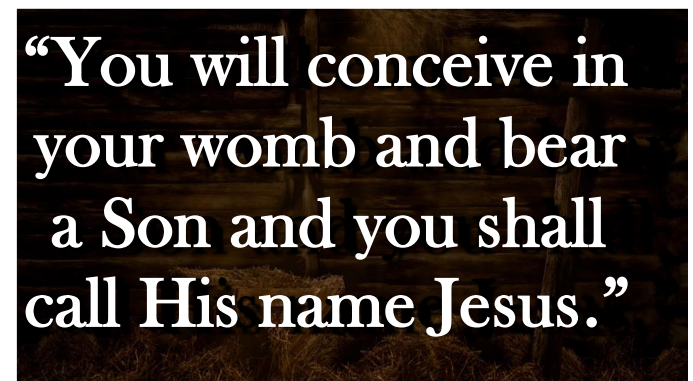
Mary had NOT been praying: "*O God, please get me out of my marriage to Joseph.*"

Mary's response to the angel **Gabriel** was the standard response to an angel. **Mary** was troubled. **Zechariah** had been troubled when **Gabriel** appeared to him: "**Fear**" fell upon **Zechariah**. But the initial response *of* fear is *where* the similarity between **Zechariah** and **Mary** stops.

Because after **Gabriel** says to **Mary**: "*Do not be afraid,*" IF **Mary** IS afraid: we never know it; we never see it.

And ... please ... think about this from young **Mary's** point of view.

As I was studying this and thinking about this this week. I have a hard time imagining that **Mary** really did take in anything much ... into her head after she heard the words:



Now ... a LOT of good stuff comes after that.

- *He will be great.*
- *He will be called the Son of the Most High.*
- *The Lord will give Him the throne of His father, David.*
- *He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.*
- *His kingdom will have no end.*

ALL GOOD STUFF ... RIGHT?

“Could you go back to the ‘conceive in my womb’ part? I’m just a little fuzzy on the ... ‘conceive in my womb’ part ... if you don’t mind?”

Mind blown!

In **Mary’s** culture to become pregnant while betrothed was ... at a bare minimum ... **bare minimum** ... a cause for intense shame.

THE LEVITICAL HOLINESS CODE, particularly what we read in our chapters 18 and 20;

Combine that with

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF THE CONQUEST OF THE LAND and the failure of God’s people to remain sexually pure but instead to take on the sexual morals and practices of the nations around them

Combine that with

THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE PROVERBS

Combine that with

THE PROPHETIC PRONOUNCEMENTS AGAINST SEXUAL IMMORALITY

And then layer all of that very heavily with

CENTURIES OF RABBINIC INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION.

It is not that **Mary** would have had a *scholar’s* grasp of everything the Scriptures taught and everything that the Rabbis applied.

But **Mary** would have known ...: *“Could you go over the ‘conceive in my womb’ part just one more time.”*

Mary’s question with reference to her virginity was **not just** a **biological** question. You’re *missing the point* of **Mary’s** question if you’re only hearing **Mary** ask a **biological** question.

If you’re *only* **hearing** a **biological** question then you’re not **hearing Gabriel** with **Mary’s** ears. If you’re only **hearing** “**biology**” then you’re making **Mary** hear with **your** ears.

Automatically, in **Mary’s** mind, there is a contradiction. “You **greet** me, **Gabriel**, as: *Favored*

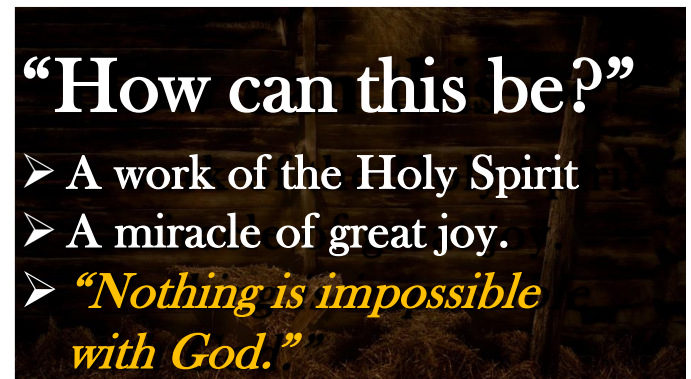
one of God; you have found favor with God.” That’s how you **greet** me.

Then you tell me I will become pregnant ... like ... right now. I know how my people treat unmarried, pregnant girls. And especially, how they treat ... them **if** that unmarried, pregnant girl is betrothed.

So ... exactly *how* ... **Gabriel** is ... what you just described *God blessed?*” That doesn’t make any sense to young **Mary**, the normal young maiden from Galilean village of Nazareth.

And ... just like **Gabriel** *accurately* interpreted **Zechariah’s** question about fathering a child in old age; **Gabriel** *accurately* heard the **disbelief** in **Zechariah’s** question.

Gabriel did *not* hear **disbelief** in **Mary’s** question: *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*



Mary asks a very honest question - a question *without guile* - to which **Gabriel** gives a three-part answer.

First part: The conception in your womb will be a work of the Holy Spirit. **You** will *remain* a virgin. **Your** chastity will not be compromised. **Your** child will be **holy**. In fact, **your** child will be the *Son of God*. That’s the *first part* of **Gabriel’s** answer.

Second part of the answer: This IS truly a *miraculous* matter of great joy. Your aged relative **Elizabeth**, *older* than your own mother, *well past* her own child-bearing age: *she* is already six months pregnant!

If someone wants to dis-believe the **miracle** of *your* pregnancy then they're going to have to explain way the **miracle** of *Elizabeth's* pregnancy.

Mary, this truly *is* good news of great joy! **God is** at work. **God is** accomplishing something large. **You** are *not* alone in the purposes of God. **You** *don't* need to be afraid. What is happening *is* a good thing.

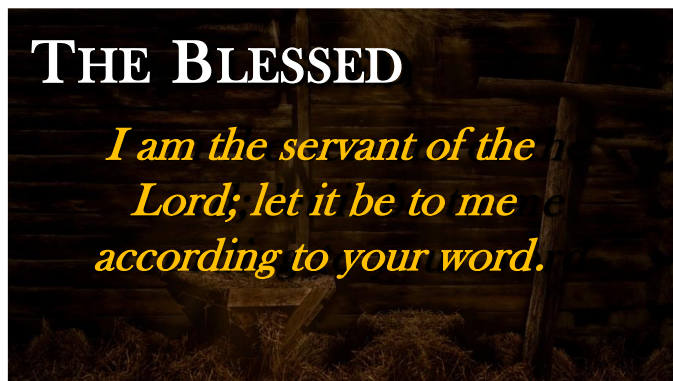
Third part of **Gabriel's** answer: **FOR NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD!** Don't you fear, **Mary**: God **IS** going to take care of the biology part.

But **Mary**, don't fear: **God** is also going to **take care** of the **shame** part. **God** will **take care** of the *'be stoned on the outskirts of town'* part

Nothing ... *nothing* ... will be **impossible** with **God!**"

What **Mary** could *not* have known at the time was how **God** would **over-rule** the legitimately conservative reaction of her betrothed, **Joseph**. **Mary** could *not* have known at the time how **Joseph** would *prove* himself to be *not only* kind ... but *obedient* to the Lord. **Obedient** ... even ... *if* that obedience **meant** Joseph would quietly absorb her shame and would protect her and would protect her child.

In that moment, of **Gabriel's** announcement **Mary** didn't know any of that.



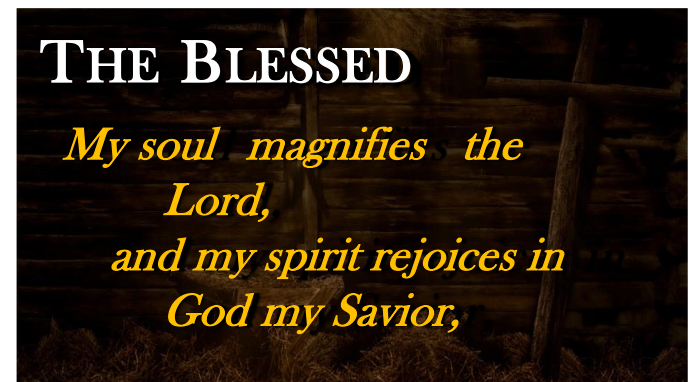
Hear this through **Mary's** ears. **Experience** this through **Mary's young maiden's** eyes. If we're experiencing this moment real-time with Mary, then

our jaws ought to drop to the floor, and through the floor when this ... young Mary then says:, ***"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."***

In *that* moment with *those* words this young Galilean maiden *reveals* a kind of *depth* of **obedience** to **God** and *trust in God* that just ...beggars ... *stagger*s the imagination.

I call **Mary** **"THE BLESSED"** because *that* is what **Mary** called herself in her *famous prayer*. I won't unpack the prayer. After going in haste down to see her relative **Elizabeth** and **Elizabeth** **IS** pregnant and **Elizabeth** *rejoices* in the pregnancy of **Mary**

Mary crafts this ... magnificent prayer, and she begins this way:



THE BLESSED

*For behold, from now on
all generations will
call me blessed;*

THE BLESSED

*for He who is mighty, has
done great things for
me,
and holy is His name.”*

THE BLESSED

*ALL GENERATIONS
WILL CALL ME
BLESSED*

I know what the modern scholars say. The modern liberal scholars say, that **Mary** never prayed this prayer. That **THIS** prayer was simply beyond the capability of a young, probably illiterate Galilean teenager.

Modern liberal scholars say, **THIS** is a prayer composed decades later by those first people who began to worship **Mary** and **THOSE** people PUT these words into **Mary's** mouth.

To which I reply: “How sexist. How belittling.” Why could young **Mary** NOT come up with these words?

If roughly a millennia before when young **David** was about the same age as young **Mary** is in our text today;

And young **David** could take on **Goliath** and come out with *those powerful words*: “*This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, that all the earth may know there is a God in Israel.*”

(Now ... liberal scholars don't believe in the Biblical account of **David & Goliath** ... but they still think it's a great story; and they don't accuse **David** of being too young to be so articulate! But I digress!)

If young **David** can be articulate in the pressure of the moment; what prevents *young Mary* from composing this magnificent prayer?

Nothing will be impossible with God.

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE BLESSED

Mary IS blessed.

Did Mary feel “blessed

- **when Jesus left home at 30?**
- **when Jesus seemed to distance Himself ...?**
- **when she watched her Son die?**

But think about Pentecost!!!

Think about ... the legacy!!!