

Do you all remember a gentleman by the name of John Edward, not John Edwards the former United States Senator from North Carolina, but John Edward a self-proclaimed psychic medium and predictor of the future? Between 2000 and 2004 he had his own TV show CALLED *Crossing Over*. Edward has been portrayed as helping thousands with his uncanny ability to predict future events and communicate with those who have crossed over to the Other side.

Over time his volume of clientele increased significantly and included young to old, student to professor, law enforcement agencies, people from everyday life and people of the clergy. His popularity is so massive that people are willing to wait over two years to sit with him for private sessions.

I admit, if I saw his show while browsing channels, I would watch. In fact, I remember having brief conversations with my Mom about his show and his “abilities.” I recall being somewhat amazed by his perceived set of skills, but Amy, on the other hand found it easy to question his veracity and most likely labeled his actions as hocus pocus type stuff. Truth be told, neither one of us really knows, but I suspect we continue to hold these differing beliefs about his “abilities.”

Now, it is important to understand that John Edward is simply the first name that popped into my head, when thinking about supernatural communication, but I’m certain you have other names. Names like Miss Cleo, Sylvia Browne or for those who focus on predicting future events, the name Nostradamus might sound more familiar. No matter what, it is safe to say that we (the human race) have a long and story-filled history of messages being delivered in mysterious supernatural ways.

As a friend recently reminded me, we are not much into mystery today. He went on to make the point that our chief aim seems to be to eliminate mystery...solve every problem...fix everything that is broken...from the economy to healthcare to the church.

Given that modern day mindset...it seems fairly difficult for us to embrace the stories of all these encounters people had with Angels. For us these

encounters defy reason, and anything that defies reason we tend to throw out. In his book “Embracing the Mysterious God,” Rev. James Emery White states “Reason is limited in what it brings to the table of spiritual reality. It leaves little room for a God beyond our five senses. We insist on fitting God within the limits of our intellect, which leads to anxiety and frustration, not PEACE. By its very definition, the mystery of God is outside of reason’s capacity to understand.”

Let’s think about this for a moment. Can any of you remember the last time you had a conversation with an Angel, or the last time someone shared with you that they had a conversation with an Angel. My gut tells me you can’t. I wonder what this says about our ability to communicate with God today. Did God decide to stop using Angels, stop using messengers? Or has our desire, our need, for reason and understanding left us deaf?

I don’t know about you, but I cannot help but wonder what our need for reason, our need for complete intellectual consent and understanding, has done to mystery. Is our day to day existence completely devoid of mystery? Is mystery something we seek to avoid because we cannot fully understand? Or is mystery only acceptable when it comes from our Bible and was experienced by those Biblical Characters upon whom we have placed faith and belief? No matter what, my sense is, the inability to embrace mystery leaves us anxious, maybe even fearful instead of PEACEFUL.

YOU SEE:

THE MYSTERY OF GOD IS OUTSIDE OF REASON’S CAPACITY TO UNDERSTAND.

THIS ALSO MEANS THE MYSTERY OF GOD IS OUTSIDE OF OUR CAPACITY TO UNDERSTAND.

AND YOU KNOW WHAT, ITS OK!

Turning now to today’s text, we discover the story of an Angel, the same Angel who appeared to Zechariah to inform him of the upcoming birth of his son John, ... appearing to a young teenage girl named Mary. This time Gabriel’s message was about another birth to be and this time Mary was the Mother. Her initial response came in the form of a question. Mary says, v. 34 “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Now as tempting as it is to focus

on her status as a virgin, our focus today is on her Peaceful acceptance of Gabriel's news.

When I attempt to process Mary's response through my 2016 mindset, I find it difficult to comprehend. I start asking questions like, how could Mary so easily accept this news? After all she was only a teenager, some say 15 at the time. It is hard for me to believe that her only response to this life-changing revelation was to ask 1 question about how it was going to happen.

Now maybe you all are far more theologically gifted than I am, but I want to know where can I read about Mary's concern about talking with an Angel in the first place? I want to hear her say "Was I just talking with an Angel? Surely that didn't just happen. Something must be wrong with me, there is no way I was just talking with an Angel." I trust you know the kinds of conversations I'm talking about.

My sense is finding that part of Mary's story would make all the difference for me. It is here that I run smack into why I so want to find that part of her story. You see, I desperately want some aspect of Mary's response to look like my response because that would help me start to feel better about myself. Maybe I am not alone.

Wanting to see Mary respond like we would is why I think this story challenges us more than we like to admit. Through our eyes, this story becomes the picture of a chaos created by the hand of God. Mary didn't plan for this. Joseph didn't plan for this. Nevertheless it was going to happen.

But if we can see this through Mary's eyes, we get to experience her peaceful demeanor. Allowing Mary to work through us, allows her peacefulness throughout Luke's account to become a tool to teach us about encountering and accepting change in our own lives. In order to do this though, we must first know something more about who she is.

Although our Bible tells us little about her background, it does tell us Mary was a devoted practicing Jew. Now part of what this meant was to know the stories of your ancestors and their interactions with God. Many of those stories included encounters with Angels sent by God. Such encounters were not uncommon, (there are over 100 in the Hebrew Bible) and these stories were widely known and handed down from generation to generation.

The reason for placing importance on the number of encounters with Angels is because it provides critical context if we want Mary to be our guide. She knew and trusted in her ancestors encounters with the Angels sent by God. She knew these Angels were armed with God's invitation to more fully enter into, more fully take part in, more fully dedicate one's life to God's reconciling work.

Being a devoted practicing Jew was the reason she knew that entering into relationship with God meant something totally different than believing in God. She knew that from the very start of creation, God sought relationship with God's beloved children and this relationship can only be fully understood as one of movement and flow, not static intellectual consent. Precisely because of her heritage she knew that JOY AND PEACE always came by accepting God's invitation.

This helps explain why Mary asked Gabriel how she was to become the mother of Jesus. She was seeking information about the process, not questioning or doubting the forthcoming event. She wanted to know how best she could do her part.

This transforms her story. It becomes a story about accepting that we cannot always fully understand. It becomes a story about embracing mystery, especially the mystery of God. Mary's story doesn't require intellectual consent, not from her and definitely not from us.

Her story is about accepting God's invitation to relationship. It is an invitation to look past oneself and choose to take part in something much bigger. Mary's story is about choosing Peace.

Seeing Mary's story through her eyes helps me to better see stories of others who I know have accepted God's invitation in their own life. Amazingly, when I ask these people to explain their experience, without exception the response is something along the lines of: "I felt like I was in the midst of something bigger than myself. Like I was caught up in some kind of movement. Everything about it was peaceful"

Similar to Mary, my friends came to realize that the very purpose of their life, NO LIFE IN GENERAL, was to give themselves to that which is larger

than themselves. I do not believe Mary's peaceful demeanor, nor the peace experienced by my friends, happened by chance.

What does all of this mean for us today?

First, with God...change is coming. God's Kingdom is dynamic...never static. Change is always coming. God has no intention of leaving us where we are. Rather God is always inviting us to new places where God can do great things in and through us.

Most of us like to have our lives planned out and have at least some sense of direction for our future. I hear people talk about time lines like wanting to be married by 30 or have a child before 33 or make so much money by the time I am 40. I hear others talking about target dates for retirement and where they intend to live.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with such planning. Sometimes God blesses such efforts, but sometimes God has other ideas. Just as Mary's plans got turned upside-down, so it often is with ours.

I cannot tell you the number of people I know whose plans didn't work out and left them feeling desperate, But then a new and different path became clear for their lives and they ended up happier than they could have ever imagined. Sometimes God has other ideas...dynamic and different ideas for our lives. He certainly did mine.

Second, with God...all things are possible. Nothing is beyond the reach of God's hand. Mary was able to trust God enough to move forward. She had a peace in her heart. She knew God had bigger plans for her than she could know or comprehend. She knew God was using her for some greater purpose. She was simply obedient. Or perhaps it was not so simple. In the end she trusted God and believed that all things are possible. **SHE FOUND PEACE IN WHAT MIGHT HAVE OTHERWISE BEEN THE CHAOS!**

So, as we leave here today, my prayer is that we do so with these two truths at the forefront of our consciousness. First, God is active and dynamic in our lives and change is certain. Second, with God in our lives anything is possible. Trusting that reality gives us a Peace that can face anything. And that is the good news for this day. In Jesus' name...Amen.