

Every Sunday, we hear evidence that God speaks to people. Or that God did so, once upon a time. The Bible readings always say so, even if God's off-stage, in an advisory role. And Christmas is my favorite example of God speaking with very few words. Gabriel invites Mary to give birth to a divine child. She says yes and composes a song. Luke made sure to include the lyrics in his Gospel. You could call it the Gospel According to Mary. We just heard Elizabeth's dust-jacket blurb, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what the Lord spoken to her."

In other words, Mary, unlike my husband the fancy priest, when the angel came to you with God's message about a miraculous pregnancy, you trusted the message.

Although I was brought up in the church and never gave it up, I've been thinking about this business of God speaking to people and how it doesn't seem to happen any more. Like Elizabeth's husband the priest, I may have been spoken to by an angel or even God, but I must have missed it. People talk about what the Holy Spirit is doing in their life and I think, "I must not be a very good Christian, because I never notice her paying any attention to me."

The teacher in me notes that even in the Bible, God moves gradually off-stage, stops walking in the Garden with people and speaking from the burning bush. In the later books of the Bible, God barely appears. In the age of enlightenment, science, and now digital wizardry, the good lord has become a universal spirit of love, reason, justice, and so on. Not a conversation partner.

In other parts of the world, however, notably Africa, tech-savvy, university-educated people manage to notice the actions of the Holy Spirit, to seek Her help, and pay attention to her warnings.

Many of you are probably like me. Wary of religious people who seem so sure that God has whispered His Word in their ears. Who thank God for making sure they left the house late last Wednesday and didn't get in that awful accident on Highway 52. I'm just not *that religious*. But I do really love studying Scripture, and part of what draws me in is God. The main character of the Bible. The character we are kind of like, though it's tempting to cynically say that the Bible makes God look kind of like us. Which it does.

Genesis says we are made in the image and likeness of God. Critics say that religious people make God in the image and likeness of humans. So which one is it? Well, one of the reasons I love the story of the Incarnation so much, maybe even more than the story of the Resurrection, is this: At Christmas, God shows people, as Huston Smith wrote, *if God could take on human form, this is what God would be like*. A helpless baby. A fierce critic of religious hypocrites. A victim of Roman justice. A fearless, homeless, wandering healer.

He was the living, breathing, sleeping, teaching answer to the question about God no longer speaking to people. John even called him ο λογος ο θεου. God's Word. God's self-expression. So we should learn all we can about this man. What makes our religion different from Judaism, Islam, and so many more is all due to him.

I don't say our religion is *the best*, except, to quote the theologian, military dentist, and football fan DeAnna Miller, "saying our religion is the best is like a kid on the playground declaring, "my mom is the best mom in the world." It's true, but hardly objective. So we're Episcopalian, and it's our way of telling the Jesus story, AND there are plenty of other ways of connecting with God, even including some ways that don't even use the word, "God."

The author of Hebrews, trying to console his fellow Jews, after the Romans made it impossible to keep their religion the way it was, tells the Jesus story this way: *God never really wanted us to sacrifice animals. Didn't need us to waste the innocent flesh of all those bulls and turtle doves. So God became flesh. Became our sacrificial victim. Became our Temple. Became our priest. God has moved on, so we can.*

Mary tells the Jesus story better than anyone, for obvious reasons. *When I heard from the messenger Gabriel that my kinswoman Elizabeth was also pregnant, I went to see her. It was a three day trip. I'd hardly gotten in the door when her eyes widened. She said her baby jumped inside her. She had to sit down. That's how she got my good news. Hail Mary, she said, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

At this point, Luke has Mary break into song. I imagine her composing the Song of Mary, The Magnificat, on that three-day journey to see Elizabeth. It comes right after the passage Rex just read, and here it is {Lynnell project}.

[And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,
has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly,
has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."]

That was what Mary concluded the Holy Spirit was doing in *her* life. None of us will ever do such important work as giving birth to the Word of God, and raising a child who would, in time, bring down and lift up.

Somehow, Jesus is still at it. For us who seek his wisdom and believe in his divine identity, Jesus continues to be the Word, and offers us the timeless challenge to be more loving even as in our own small ways, we bring down and lift up.

Advent draws now to an end. The fourth candle burns. The Word is about to be made flesh. Universal love is about to be born again, on the pages of the Bible, and in the souls of those who want to live inside that love.