

Advent Retreat 2025 *Fall Creek Abbey*

Holy Bewilderment

Welcome to the Fall Creek Abbey Advent Retreat 2025! Bless you for choosing to take time out from your full life to be here. Because you've likely arrived with a lot on your mind and heart, it's often helpful to begin by noticing how you come to the time.

- How are you feeling about being here?
- What kind of shape are you in personally, spiritually, mentally, and physically?

Write down your honest responses to these questions in the space provided. After checking in with yourself, use your reflections as a prompt to engage in a real and candid conversation with God. Talk to your Gracious Host about how you feel right now. Ask Christ's Spirit to meet you during this time.



The theme for this year's Advent guide is "holy bewilderment," a phrase I came across in the first chapter of Debie Thomas' book *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories*. She uses this phrase to describe Mary's response to Gabriel, an angel sent by God who announced to her the first Advent of Christ.

I'd never heard anyone put together these two words before: *holy* and *bewilderment*. They're an odd coupling, aren't they? Yet as I've pondered them more, they've become strangely fitting to describe experiences far more familiar to me than first presumed. Those "how can this be?" moments in life when what is happening seems bewildering and perplexing, and yet I detect a shimmer of peculiar promise and hope.

Perhaps holy bewilderment describes how you feel, or how you felt, during a season of questioning your faith. Or maybe it describes your response to the environmental crisis or the political chaos in our country. It could also describe something closer to home; your emotions related to a painful conflict or the loss of a significant relationship. In any of these instances, this odd coupling might be the goad for you to keep looking for how God is present in your "how can this be?" moment.

This guide borrows heavily from the first chapter of Thomas' book (see all quotations) as it puts the spotlight on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her encounter with Gabriel. Read the following passage a few times, slowly, reflectively, and prayerfully. Make notes of what impresses you about this exchange between Mary and Gabriel.

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

"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.**"

Let's linger in the story a bit and consider the five phrases in bold above from Luke's account of this encounter.

If an angel were to visit you right now and greet you in this way, what would that be like? In all honesty, what is it like for you to believe in God's favor, to bask in God's loving gaze?

1. Greetings, favored one!

Imagine Gabriel addressing Mary in this way. How do you picture this greeting sounding to Mary?

Notice that Gabriel speaks of God's favor of Mary *before* Mary ever says "yes" to what the angel is proposing. Sit with this realization for a minute and let it sink in. What does that tell you?

"Imagine the audacity of this young peasant girl, scandalously pregnant, peddling an angel story that no one will believe, living on the unremarkable outskirts of empire, to declare without shame or apology that she is highly favored by God. This is not the song of a spiritually timid human being. This is the song of a young woman who is passionately in love with a God who is passionately in love with her."

How do you respond to this description of Mary? What questions does it raise? What about it resonates or conflicts with previous ways of viewing her?

2. She was perplexed (bewildered)

What can you imagine was so bewildering to Mary about the angel's appearance and greeting? What do you think she would have puzzled over?

Can you think of a time when you felt bewildered by something that God seemed to be saying to you, perhaps even through an “angelic” messenger? What was that like, and how were you affected or changed by it?

“It is not that the Annunciation leads her out of doubt and into faith; it is that her encounter with the angel leads her out of certainty into holy bewilderment. Out of familiar spiritual territory and into a lifetime of pondering, wondering, questioning, and wrestling. “How can this be?”

Debie Thomas describes this moment for Mary as an “encounter that led her out of certainty into holy bewilderment.” Have you ever experienced anything like this? Perhaps that describes where you are now. What was or is it like for you to be led out of certainty into holy bewilderment? What emotions or feelings do you notice arising in your body at this thought?

3. You will... bear

Gabriel's words forecast that Mary would bear God's son. Yet that's not all she would bear. Take a moment to write down other things that come to mind that Mary "bore" as a result of consenting to this invitation from God.

Consider these other things Mary bore:

- the scandal of an unplanned pregnancy in a culture that shuns or stones women in her condition
- the suspicion and disappointment of her fiancé, Joseph, and the scars this may have left
- the pain of labor and delivery in threadbare circumstances, far from home and kin
- the terror of all refugees who flee homes and homeland to save the lives of their children; the complicated grief and relief of Jesus surviving Herod's genocide (Matthew 2:13-16)
- the terror of a missing child and the bewilderment of witnessing Jesus' wisdom-beyond-years (Luke 2:41-51)
- the financial risk of her firstborn leaving the family business to become an itinerant preacher
- the pride *and* embarrassment when Jesus returned to his hometown (Nazareth) with his ragtag band of

disciples and his appalling assertions about his identity (Matthew 13:54)

- the whispers of her other children as they conclude that Jesus, their brother, is mad/insane (Mark 3:20)
- watching her son lynched at the hands of an unjust empire and complicit religion—as she suffers becoming a mother of a criminal (John 19:25-26)
- the pain of Jesus leaving her and returning to heaven (Mark 16:19-20)

“When we consent to bear the unbearable, we learn a new kind of hope. A hope set free from expectation and frenzy. A resurrected hope that doesn't need or want easy answers. A hope that accepts the grayness of things and leaves room for mystery.”

Can you relate to this? In what ways have you experienced the unbearable when you've said "yes" to God? Did you experience hope resurrected? If so, how? If not, what is it like to still bear what feels hopeless?

4. Here I am

Notice that before Mary consents to God's request, she shows up! "Here I am." In this encounter, Mary offers her whole self to God *before* she surrenders herself to God's invitation. Debie Thomas writes that, "Before we give ourselves away, we have to have a coherent sense of self." What does it mean to you to have a "coherent sense of self?"

What other indicators are you aware of that suggest that Mary had a clear sense of who she was? That she knew herself?

How does this statement speak to you about your own sense of who you are? What is crystal clear to you about who you are? What is still fuzzy?

Reflect on what has helped you most to become clear about who you are and possess a coherent sense of self?

"In a world that diminishes so many people, I'm grateful for the boldness of the girl-child, Mary, standing at the cusp of everything in the presence of God's own messenger and saying without inhibition, 'Here I am. Here is all of me, coherent and whole, free and unfettered, ready and receptive, fearful and faithful. Exactly as you, oh God, have created me. Here I am.'"

Take a moment and consider these words describing this "here I am" moment in Mary's encounter with God. Would you be willing to pray them as your prayer? If so, take some time to express them to the Holy One who bears witness to you and your prayer.

5. Then the angel departed

Gabriel, instead of taking a leave of absence from heaven to stay with Mary over the next nine months—or how about over Jesus' life span—*left!* “The glow fades, the angel departs, and Mary is left to do the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship of her own son.”

Consider what it was like for Mary to experience this epiphany only to have it end. Her glowing mountaintop experience dissolves into memory, and she is left to “obey God in the muck of life down in the valley.” What do you think that was like for her?

Can you relate to the fading “afterglow” of an epiphany, along with living out the challenges of obedience through the muck of life down in the valley?

“We can dare to trust that the God who chose the womb of a colonized peasant girl two-thousand years ago still chooses the ordinary, unexceptional stuff of our everyday lives to birth the Messiah into our midst. To say yes to God is to say yes to the silence after the divine announcement. It is to trust that even in the valley where nothing shimmers, nothing will be impossible with God.”

How do these words speak to you right now? In what situations are you being called to “birth the Messiah” into our world? How does Mary’s courage and consent speak to you?

Finally, how are you being led out of certainty into *holy bewilderment*? What does this phrase mean to you *now*, today?