

What Mortals Said

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Isaiah 7:10-17

Luke 1:18-20; 34-38; 46-55; 2:1-7; 15-20

“How will I know that this is so...?...How can this be...?...Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.”

“In language, as in life,” writes essayist Michele Morano, “moods are complicated, but at least in language there are only two. The indicative mood is for knowledge, facts, absolutes, for describing what’s real or definite....The indicative helps you tell what happened or is happening or will happen in the future (when you believe you know for sure what the future will bring).

“The subjunctive mood, on the other hand, is uncertain. It helps you tell...what might be....[It] is the mood of mystery...of faith interwoven with doubt. It’s a held breath, a hand reaching out....It’s humility, deference, the opposite of hubris.” Morano goes on to catalogue the indications of this mood, indications that are sometimes placed at the beginning of a sentence, such as *I hope* or *if* and *as if*; the subjunctive mood also follows expressions like *It is possible* and verbs of misgiving or emotion—*You doubted that it could be...*, or *You were thrilled at the possibility*. It can be heard after certain indications of time—*while*, *until*, *as soon as*, *before* and *after*—because until something has happened, you cannot be sure. The subjunctive mood also hides in good wishes: *Have a good time* means I am wishing for you the possibility of a good time. Finally, though not exhaustively, Morano mentions the subjunctive mood that lurks in independent clauses (This is extraordinary—*isn’t it?* or *Suffice it to say...*) and rests in clauses that lace “hope with heartache. *Be that as it may*, for example. Or the phrase one says at parting, eyes closed as if in prayer: *May all go well with you.*” I hasten to add that there are many more than two moods in language. Morano fails to mention the imperative mood of command and exhortation as well as the optative mood of wishing that pushes the subjunctive mood to its limit, but for this morning and this meditation, the two moods she does mention will do.

Now if you are sitting in the pew as one whose speech tends toward the indicative mood, you may already be thinking that the subjunctive mood betrays a lack of faith whereas the indicative mood indicates rock solid orthodoxy. Suffice it to say, I hope you might be persuaded to think again! Facts and absolutes are statements that presume no leap on the part of a mortal who already inhabits a certain universe. To borrow Karl Barth’s critique of religion, facts and absolutes are what people believe in instead of God. Or to paraphrase the Anglican theologian Lesslie Newbigin, “To believe that [God was in Christ] can only be the result of a very radical change of mind. Without that change of mind, the story is too implausible to be regarded as part of real history. Indeed, the simple truth is that the [incarnation] cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point.” Were the church’s proclamation to claim anything less, accommodating faith to our way of knowing the facts (which is what literal fundamentalism does, by the way), we would be left with nothing real about which to be amazed. So the church says “The Word became flesh” on Christmas Eve in the indicative mood, knowing that the kind of fact it is can only be heard to be true as it transfigures human objectivity itself. Short of such a change of mind, the indicative

mood indicates that a person has arrived in the camp of the assuredly saved, whereas what mortals say in the subjunctive mood has to do with faith and hope and the self-emptying work of love that is the Incarnation.

So let us turn to the incarnation and to the angelic messenger's announcement that a virgin shall conceive and bear and name a son who will be called Son of God. Ventures Mary in the subjunctive mood: "How can this be?" Two things must be said of human speech as our words attempt a response to the conversation that is God: first, that the truth revealed in God's Word become flesh resists the indicative mood of religious certitude; and second, that the subjunctive mood is the mood that indicates a merely human being, a mortal, has heard *God's* address.

Concerning the resistance of God's Word to the indicative mood, suffice it to say that when the statement "God was in Christ" is said with certitude but without the change of mind Newbigin spoke about, the claim becomes a fact alongside every other fact. Admittedly, its utterance may elicit, from the one who hears, the identical words Mary has said to the angel: How can this be? Yet the mood of this question asked of a fact we can know in the same way we know other facts presumes that the competence of our knowing, not to mention the assurance of our being "saved", is at stake.

The indicative statements of true believers who claim to know, for instance, that human beings simply appeared on the earth 10,000 years ago because the Bible tells them so (40% of the population know this according to the latest Gallup Poll) or to know the gynecological details of this humanly inconceivable birth, equate the knowledge we receive from God's address (revelation) with our knowledge of the kitchen table that exists because you scrub it. Their claims may properly echo the words of the church's confession but have little if anything to do with the God whose Word became flesh. Apparently they are facts we should be able to grasp if we believe. But what if the word that is *God's* Word resists such knowing?

Consider the same words spoken by one whose speech, in response to what has been heard, is encompassed by a "mood of mystery...of faith interwoven with doubt...of a breath held, a hand reaching out...of humility and deference." The trustworthiness of God is alone at stake in what is claimed. The truth insinuates itself upon our lives not by way of disembodied propositions distilled from a story but through the Word of God incarnate in a human life. Contrary to the Cosmic Christmas of which we spoke last week, the Word at the beginning of Luke's gospel becomes scandalously particular. Here our imagination is not allowed to run wild, but is simply told to run to Bethlehem! And when, in response to what we have seen and heard, we attempt (like the shepherds) to say what "God was in Christ" means, then every step we dare to take toward faith is prefaced by a subjunctive exclamation: "This is astounding—isn't it!" "A quite *astonishment* stands at the beginning of every theological thought...in fact at the root of every theological word," wrote Karl Barth:

If such astonishment is lacking, the whole enterprise of even the best theologian would canker at the roots. On the other hand, as long as even a poor theologian is capable of astonishment, he is not lost to the fulfillment of his task. He remains serviceable as long as the possibility is let open that astonishment may seize him like an armed [bandit].

The language mortals may borrow to speak of the God who was in Christ, then, is something akin to what the astonished shepherds said as they attempted to tell others what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed, says Luke, at what the shepherds told them. But we are getting ahead of the story!

In the second place, Mary's "How can this be?" leads us to notice that the subjunctive mood is the mood that indicates a merely human being may possibly have heard God's address. I think it not by chance that the upright and good Zechariah, the priest who has known good and evil according to the law, asks Gabriel, "How will I know that this is so?" Coming immediately before the announcement of Christ's conception, this is a story of fallen human knowledge still seeking divine warrant to speak of God in the indicative mood, to speak as a creature who knows for sure because God has spoken more or less directly. Luke tells us that such speech is silenced by Gabriel: "...because you have not believed my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." It is as though Gabriel is sparing the congregation from Zechariah's priestly attempts to fit what was about to happen into what his mind could grasp.

But keep listening! For to the indicative mood of the same angel who announces, "You will conceive and bear and name," Mary asks a question whose words, as we have just noted, brim with astonishment: "How can this *be*?" She cannot conceivably fit what she has heard into merely human ways of knowing, of knowing something for a fact or knowing something is so. In his commentary on Mary's question to the angel, Calvin holds that she has taken "what is beyond the common order of nature...to be impossible. She reasons *I know not a man*: how then can I believe that what you tell me will happen?" Yet he acquits her of her failure immediately to rise "by faith to the boundless power of God" and goes on to note that "she does not hesitate or inquire *in such a manner as to lower the power of God to her senses*; but is only carried away by a sudden impulse of astonishment to put this question." Likewise Luther, in his sermon on the same text, observes that the address of the angel sent "a shot of unbelief in her heart" and "took her breath away with shock."

The subjunctive mood is the mood that indicates a human being has *heard* the address of God and has heard the address of *God*. Revelation, says Barth, makes a place for itself in human cognition. "It does not allow itself to be halted by the normal and customary limitation and contingency of [our] ability to know....It gives itself to be known. It creates the possibility of a seeing and hearing and understanding of it. Or rather, it creates eyes to see it and ears to hear it and a mind to understand it." It is as though Mary's "How can this be?" invites us to imagine God in the act of making a place in Mary's cognition rather than Mary's cognition making a place for God.

So the question would be, on this Sunday awash with carols and alive with anticipation, whether the same God whose angel silenced Zechariah and hailed Mary is making a place in the cognition of unremarkable mortals such as we are, making a place for Christ to be born in us. What, we may now ask finally, of the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night? The announcement of the angels is in the indicative: To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord! And here are the facts (get out your pencils!): You shall find the babe, wrapped clothes and lying in a manger. When the angels had gone away from them to heaven, what did these mortals say? Let us go. Let us leave the world we know. Let us go even unto Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which *the Lord has made known unto us*."

If on Christmas Eve, in some dark and hushed sanctuary, there should come over you the mood of mystery, of faith interwoven with doubt...a held breath, a hand reaching out; if as you listen to the story and hear the choir above you as though there were suddenly a multitude of heavenly hosts surrounding your weary head, if in that moment you should say to yourself, "How can this be?" or even exclaim in a whisper

to the one by your side, “This is astonishing—Isn’t it?”, meaning the music, but meaning so much more: perhaps, just perhaps, the child who was born of Mary is, even now, creating a place, is seeking a room, is becoming flesh in you. “Be it unto me,” you find yourself saying, “according to your Word.” Thanks be to God!