

## The Heart of Darkness

Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

Putting things away and helping her mother in the kitchen gave Mary a sense of routine and settling that eased the tension of unfounded apprehension and put the misty feelings out of view. She eased tenderly into the warmth of the rut of daily monotony, happy for its protection. For days, Mary had been having an uneasy feeling. Nothing big. Nothing you could put your finger on. Just a strange feeling that she wasn't alone. The house had the feeling it had when you could tell someone was there even when you didn't see them. But she knew all her family were gone.

Alone in the afternoon, she sat in the small house grinding wheat for the evening meal. Mary didn't find it difficult. It just took time. She found it pleasant, if truth were told, to sit in the sunlight beaming through the window and be warm and comfortable and young and naive. If she turned her head just so, she could just see her profile on the wall, strong and firm from the sun's solid beams. As she restfully toiled away, she remembered the trepidation of the afternoon at the market.

Just out of the corner of her eye, she had seen something. The market was crowded and she felt silly for thinking about it. But for a second, it seemed that someone was standing there looking at her. Just at her. It was ridiculous. Who would be standing around in a busy marketplace staring at a child shop? Perhaps Mary would have thought more seriously about her experience if she lived in Charlotte today, but in the Pax Romana of rural Nazareth she couldn't imagine any truth to her apprehension. There was no one there.

With her shopping done, she headed home. Mother would be waiting -- and all the neighbors even knew -- you didn't keep Ann waiting if you could help it. All the way home, she felt it. An unfamiliar twinge; she had never felt anything like it before, really. But instinctively she knew that she felt followed. It was eerie -- the feeling and the knowledge springing unbidden from deep within her. She walked from the market looking over her shoulder. She ran the last few blocks back to the house. At the door, she looked back down the street. There was no one there.

Now as she sat in the house, in the sunlight, grinding the wheat, she again noticed something was wrong. The wheat seemed fine. Nothing seemed amiss. But something had happened

that she hadn't noticed fully. She looked around the room. Nothing. Gradually she settled back to her work. Then it happened again. Briefly, something had blocked the sun's light. In the cloudless skies of Galilee, clouds claimed some notice. Rain was rare enough to bring some joy. But there were no clouds in the sky. No birds flying through that she could see from where she sat on the floor. Perhaps it was a bird, though, she thought. A bird on the wing; free and flying. The joy of the thought relieved her anxiety some. She smiled nervously, but returned to her work. Again, the flicker of a shadow across the beams of sunlight. She jumped up and looked out the window. There was no one there.

The tension of her suspect apprehensions was too much for Mary. She felt like life was suddenly playing tricks on her. Reality seemed to be backing away from her and taunting her for not coming along. As she looked at the room her vision, quite suddenly, distorted. Things appeared out of place. Halves of things disappeared leaving doorways unrealistically small and unfocused and pots cracked and broken. Glimmers of light flew about the room dancing in Mary's sight. Her vision confused, Mary was afraid. She started to try to go find someone to help, and then came the pain.

It was pain like she had never known before. Her head felt like it would split open, and she half hoped it would, thinking that would perhaps relieve the pressure. She fell to the floor and that is where her parents found her a few hours later when they returned. Today Mary's physician would perhaps diagnose her ailment as ophthalmic migraines and prescribe a simple medication to prevent the pain and alleviate the distorted vision. For Mary, it was the end of the world. She had no clear idea what was happening to her. Her mother had heard stories about others having similar afflictions. But often they were considered crazy and perhaps even possessed. The thought clung to her weary mind. Was she being possessed? Was a demon trying to take over her mind?

For days she lay quietly, the windows covered over, wanting darkness. The light hurt more than she could bear, more than she could describe. Quiet, darkness, womblike tranquility was what she prayed for. Peace. Healing. Wholeness. On the third night, the pain eased. She began to feel better. She sat awake, while the rest of the family slept, staring at the fire. Beginning to be able to enjoy once again its dark imitation of the sunlight. She felt weak. The illness of her head had robbed her of strength. Her vision was still not quite right. But she felt that she was getting better and would be well again. Good news to someone who had nearly hoped for death.

Painfully, slowly, she placed a few more sticks on the fire. They crackled and snapped and caught flame. The intensity of the flame captured Mary's attention. She watched the flames dance and sing on the hearth. As she looked around the room she saw the shadows play with each other in the deep, dark corners. Her angled vision made them seem alive. If she turned her head just so, she could see her profile on the wall. Not firm, not usual. But alive and new and kinetic in its possibilities. As she watched, suddenly she thought perhaps the shadows were alive. They moved and swayed and surrounded her on her mat. But not ominously anymore. The shadows were not evil. The darkness was not sinister in its revelry.

The fire and the darkness playfully giving and taking and creating the most illuminating visions -- shadowy dancers recreating space into a holy realm. In their dance she saw Miriam leading the people of Israel in joyous celebration after God saved them from the Egyptians. Mary looked deep in the shadows and saw David's naked dance before the ark of the covenant, joyous and wild, primal and ethereal. As the shadows frolicked around the room, Mary saw the people surrounding the pillar of fire in the wilderness. The shadows flew far and came close, going and coming, from Israel to Egypt, to Israel to Syria, to Israel to Babylon -- now singing songs of silence in the darkness of her small house in the promised land. Mary lost herself happily in the shadows, grateful for their joy and for the abatement of her pain.

"Hail, O favored one, God is with you!" The voice startled Mary. She looked around the room. There was no one there. What was happening? Maybe she was not well. Maybe the demon had simply finished the process of possession and now had control over her. The voice continued. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." The voice came from all around her. It came out of the shadow, waxing and waning about her. "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a child, whose name you shall call Jesus. This one will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give the that Child the throne of David, the ancestor of the Child, to reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of the reign there will be no end." The shadow was verbose.

Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have not known a man?"

The voice cheerfully carried on, "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 called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a child; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." The shadow was a gossip.

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of God; let it be to me according to your word."

The shadow was a friend. The power of the most high overshadowed her. Flying wildly around her, the shadows grew and danced with wild abandon, and filled the room with darkness and warmth. And completely enveloped by the Shadowy Presence, Mary found peace and wholeness and healing she could have never dreamed in the garish light of day.

AMEN.