

When I was a kid, I was normally a cloyingly well-behaved child. But by this time of year I went absolutely nuts. The idea of getting presents for no reason at all was just fantastic. One of the strangest experiences for me was getting presents from my brothers and sisters. I'm the third of six children. We spent most of the year as other children did: We fought with each other. Then, like other kids, at the end of the year we did something strange: We gave each other gifts. It's hard to know how to thank somebody you fight with. And actually, whether we fight with the gift-giver or not, sometimes it's just plain hard to accept a gift from somebody. We say, "How can it be that they want to give this to me?"

The question "How can it be?" is a question of denial. It's a question most of us ask a lot in life. We ask it of good things: "How can it be that they give me this gift?" "How can it be that I got that job?" "How can it be that we have such wonderful children?" But we also ask it of terrible things: "How can it be that I have this disease?" "How can it be that my spouse has died?" "How can it be that we're inching toward war?" When news comes, we deny that what we've heard is real.

"How can it be?" is the question that Mary asks when Gabriel announces the coming of Jesus. Before the first Christmas Day, before God revealed to the shepherds, the magi, and the people of Bethlehem the miracle of Christmas--before all that, God told Mary what would happen. What God was planning was a major historical event. It's possible he wondered what the reaction would be. So he did what anyone would do--he test-marketed the results. He told Mary. And Mary's response was denial. "How can it be?" "A Savior will come." "How can it be?" "The promise will be fulfilled." "How can it be?" God was offering a gift, but some gifts are just plain hard to accept. Mary did accept the gift, and it changed the world.

In the next few days, you may find that people act differently. They may be nice. They may smile. They may offer you gifts. Some people may try to make up for old wounds. Some may say they're sorry. Sometimes it's hard to accept kindness. But to accept the gift may change your world.