

The Call of Mary: Annunciation and Magnificat

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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Luke is the gospel of justice and joy with a special eye toward women, children and the poor. For example in Matthew's Christmas gospel Joseph is the hero. In Luke Mary is center stage.

Today's scripture begins with the words: "In the sixth month." Sixth month of what? In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John. We are marking time with what's going on with the women.

Enter the angel Gabriel. We often call this scene the Annunciation, or Announcement. Artists through the years have loved painting this scene with Mary and the angel. But it is much more than an announcement. It is a *call*, and human agency is required for it to become truly good news. So let's name it "The Call of Mary..." a call much like other famous calls in scripture: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, but this one is to a woman.

Mary, around fourteen years old was betrothed to Joseph, a man tradition says was appreciably older. They were, along with Zechariah and Elizabeth among the *Anawim*, the poor of Israel.

Gabriel appeared with a blessing on his tongue:

Hail, O favored one

The Lord is with you.

In the Bible, encounters with the Holy often evoke a sense of unworthiness and guilt. As with Isaiah: “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips.” God’s pure light suddenly reveals our inner darkness.

But not here. The scene is bathed in soft light, in grace: “Greetings, favored one of God”. And what comes from our lips is not “Woe” but thanks and praise. Here is part of the Christmas message, “God appears as grace.”

“Do not be afraid,” Gabriel then said, “for you have found favor with God.” I hope you can feel these words given to you today. Then Gabriel said, “And you will conceive in your womb, and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.”

Mary asked, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel said

The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Spirit of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore the child will be called holy, God’s own.

And the Spirit of God which hovered over the face of the deep and created the heavens and the earth overshadowed Mary's flesh and created a child of heaven and earth named Jesus, which means "God comes to save".

But not before Mary's answer, Mary's yes. The poet W.H. Auden wrote in his Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*:

...child it lies

Within your power of choosing to

Conceive the child who chooses you.¹

And Mary said yes. She offered no arguments, no hesitation—unlike many of the other call stories in the Bible, but spoke only the simple words, "Here I am, servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word.

St Augustine said that Mary conceived the Christ in her heart before she conceived him in her womb. This is the Advent invitation to us all: to conceive the child who chooses you, to make a space within for the holy one to dwell. As Paul prayed, "til Christ be born in you."

Perhaps poetry says it best. Poetry slows us down, opens up spaces, gentles us with its music. Listen to Denise Levertov's poem on this moment:

...we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited

She was free

to accept or to refuse, choice

integral to humanness...

Called to a destiny more momentous

Than any in all of time,

she did not quail

only asked

a simple, "How can this be?"

and gravely, courteously

took to heart the angel's reply,

perceiving instantly

the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb

infinite weight and lightness; to carry

in hidden, finite inwardness

nine months of Eternity; to contain

in slender vase of being,

the sum of power--

in narrow flesh

the sum of light.

Then bring to birth

push out into air, a Man-child

needing, like any other

milk and love--

but who was God.

She did not cry, "I cannot, I am not worthy,"

nor, "I have not the strength."

She did not submit with gritted teeth,

raging, coerced,

bravest of all humans, consent illumed her...

Consent

courage unparalleled

opened her utterly.²

The Jesus story begins where courage and consent meet.

II

The story moves on now to the home of Mary's older cousin Elizabeth who was of course also with child. When Mary visited her home and greeted Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy," as Luke puts it. (I told you this was the gospel of joy.) Do you, in the female part of the congregation, remember when your child first moved in your womb? Did its quickening quicken your joy, your wonder?

Then it was Mary's turn to let loose with a song. We call it the "Magnificat" because in its Latin rendering, the song begins with "Magnifies." But before it was Latin it was Greek and before it was Greek, it was Hebrew, for it echoed the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel who herself was childless for many years before Samuel was conceived. It seems God always starts with a child! Hannah praises God for her new son; then she praises God for coming to save the Hebrew people. Here are some of the words:

The bows of the mighty are broken

But the feeble put on strength.

Those once full have hired themselves out for bread,

and those who were hungry are

hungry no more!...

Yahweh brings low, Yahweh exalts
 Yahweh raises the poor from the dirt
 and lifts the needy from the dung heap.

Yahweh makes them to sit with princes and gives them seats of honor.

Mary grew up listening to Hannah's song and now sings her own:

My soul magnifies the Lord

My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

To sing of God our savior is to break the illusion of *self*-salvation. Self-salvation is the American religion. And also the South. Southern writer Flannery O'Connor once observed:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic.

You see, as much as we sing Amazing Grace, we are still secretly trying to save ourselves. But grace means pure grace. As Buechner spoke of grace: "There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing to *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do!*"³ Paul put it this way:

For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your won doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

I've told you the story of the millionaire in my church in Louisville who died soon after I arrived. His widow come in and said he wanted two songs at his funeral: "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me", and Frank Sinatra's "I did it *my way*." Can you imagine any two songs more diametrically opposed spiritually speaking? Such is the confused state of American religion.

Mary begins her song praising God for the salvation God alone brings. But next moves to a song of justice. Remember I said Luke is a gospel of justice and joy? Echoing Hannah's song she sings:

God has shown strength with his arm

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts

God has put down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of low degree

God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. (The rich already have all they need!)

Such revolutionary words from Mary! We still shy away from them. Have you ever seen them on Christmas cards? Did she sing this song to Jesus while he was still in the womb? In the crib, in her arms? I think he listened, as Luke will show.

It's like the song that made its way on slave ships from Africa, to the black church, to the Highlander School in Tennessee, to the heart of the Civil Rights movement:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome.

We shall overcome someday.

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe.

We shall overcome someday.

Or the song Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer would sing when the situation grew tense:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine,

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine.

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine,

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Or the great hymn that black poet James Weldon Johnson wrote
which has become the black national anthem:

Lift every voice and sing,

Till earth and heaven ring,

Ring with the harmonies of liberty;

Let our rejoicing rise

High as the listening skies

Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song

Full of the faith

that the dark path has taught us,

Sing a song

full of the hope

that the present has brought us;

Facing the rising sun

Of our new day begun,

Let us march on till victory is won.

I've never thought of these songs as Advent songs, but yes they are Mary's songs, Advent songs, songs of justice and joy. Let us sing Mary's song with our lives not just our lips, for this is the salvation God brings. From *Amazing Grace* to *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

And now to the questions we carry with us as we travel through Luke:

Who am I, in this story and God's story?

What is God calling me to be and to do?

And, Who is my neighbor that God is calling me to love as myself?

These are salvation's questions.

1. W.H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," in *Collected Poems* (N.Y.: Random House, 1976), p. 279
2. Denise Levertov, "Annunciation" in *Selected Poems* (N.Y.: New Directions, 2002), p. 162-4.
3. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (N.Y.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 34