

## It all Begins With a Woman and a Child

Luke 1: 26-38

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There may be few scenes in the Bible painted more often through the centuries than the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary and invites her to the most astounding of callings, to bear in her body the Christ child. It is such a beautiful scene captured by artists, tipped in gold with the angel and his many-colored wings and the young maiden aglow with holy light.

Frederick Buechner describes the scene from the viewpoint of Gabriel:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. “You mustn’t be afraid, Mary”, he said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.<sup>1</sup>

And that is about the most beautiful paragraph on the Annunciation I’ve read. God teaches us over and over what one has called “The power of one.” So here, most momentously, the one called Mary.

## I

It happened, Luke says, “in the sixth month,” that is, the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John who would become the Baptist. There was more than one miraculous birth at work. (I like this: history chronicled by what’s going on in the bodies of women!)

The angel greeted Mary: “Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you.” It is the heart of the Christmas gospel: God is with us, Immanuel, with us in the Divine favor.

Mary's heart quavered. Wouldn't yours have? Then Gabriel said the words angels seem always to be saying, "Fear Not." Angel means "messenger", and the most oft repeated message from God in the Bible is "Do not be afraid"—I'm sure because fear so often grips our quavering hearts.

"Do not be afraid", Gabriel said, "for you have found favor with God"—which is what God wants us to feel deep down in our bones, God's favor. As Aaron's benediction goes: "The Lord make his face to *shine* upon us and be *gracious to us*."

## II

And with the Divine favor came a divine invitation: to become a co-creator with God in the conception and birth of a child whose name means: "God comes to save!"

Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus

Mary then raised her wondering question:

How can this be, since I have no husband?

The angel replied:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

The same Spirit that hovered over the deep at creation and brought forth the heavens and the earth would now overshadow Mary and bring forth a child of heaven and earth, a holy child, son of God.

### III

Gabriel must have read Mary's mind for next he said, "With God what is impossible becomes possible."

Madeleine L'Engle, who wrote the children's classic *A Wrinkle In Time*, has written another about Jesus called *The Glorious Impossible*. It begins with this scene, the Annunciation.

L'Engle writes:

Possible things are easy to believe. The Glorious Impossibles are what bring joy to our hearts, hope to our lives, songs to our lips.<sup>2</sup>

In another book on the Christian liturgical year, *The Irrational Season*, she writes this poem about the Christmas season:

This is the irrational season,  
when love blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been full of reason,  
There'd been no room for a child.

How often do we determine before hand what is possible and what is not possible? There is *always* more possibility than our minds can comprehend.

Then came Mary's yes:

Behold, I am a handmaid of the Lord;  
let it be to me according to your Word.

In her poem "Annunciation", poet Denise Levertov writes:

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

The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent....  
She did not cry, "I cannot, I am not worthy,"  
nor, "I have not the strength." ...

Consent,

Courage unparalleled  
opened her utterly. <sup>3</sup>

Mary said, “Let it be to me according to your Word.” She becomes here the quintessential disciple. She hears and fully receives the Word of God into her life. She becomes the sacred feminine of God.

Sometimes God says, Go! Other times, Stop. Sometimes, Speak! Other times, Become Silent. Sometimes the word is “Here’s Someone to Love.” Other times, “Make a Ruckus for Righteousness’ Sake.”

And we hear and we say yes—just like Mary. “Let it be unto me according to your Word.”

#### IV

God may be calling us to be Mary today. To be empty and receptive to God’s Word and Spirit, a vessel for the Lord. To bear within us the child called Christ, to create a holy space within where Christ can dwell.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia:

I am like a woman in child birth [I know, how could he know?!] until Christ be formed in you. (Galatians 4:19)

The first great miracle of Christmas was the birth of Christ into the world.

The second miracle of Christmas is Christ born in us. Formed in us

St. Augustine wrote that Mary conceived Christ in her heart before she conceived him in her womb. So on this day when we remember Gabriel's invitation to Mary, let us conceive him in our hearts. May the word of Christ dwell in us. The first and last word is love. God's love for you, God's love for the whole world—always, always the same love. It is the love that will not let us go. It is the love given that we might have life and flourish as the daughters and sons of God. As John wrote:

See what love the Father has given us—love as if from another country—that we should be called children of God. And indeed we are. (1 John 3:1 translation of George A. Buttrick)

## V

Sheldon Vanauken was an agnostic professor of literature who became friends with C.S. Lewis. Somewhere along the way he became a believer. In a poem about his conversion he wrote:

...here

The Church must stand or fall. It's *Christ* we weigh

All else is off the point....

The Question is, did God send us the Son

Incarnate crying Love! Love is the way!<sup>4</sup>

Henri Nouwen, the noted spiritual writer, began a close friendship with a man who was more secular than religious. One day while he and Fred were walking in New York City, Fred turned to him and said, “Why don’t you write something about the spiritual life for me and my friends.” That is, for people who find believing so difficult. Thus came Nouwen’s book *Life of the Beloved*. Early in the book here is what he said to his friend (and to us):

...all I want to say to you is “You are the Beloved”, and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being— “You are the Beloved.”<sup>5</sup>

Would you let this word be Christ’s own word to you? Let it dwell in you, gestate in you, grow in you for nine months? Every day until September 22, 2020?

The heart of Jesus’ own spirituality was his own sense of belovedness in the eyes of the God he called *Abba*, Poppa, the child’s name for a perfectly loving parent.

On the day of his baptism, as he came up out of the water, the Spirit descended as a dove and a Voice from heaven said, “You are my son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased”—in whom I take delight. It is the word God would want all of us to hear.

I do not think this was the first time he heard these words and felt God’s delight. They were the song Mary sang to him while he was in the womb. They were her lullaby to him as she nursed him and rocked him in her arms. He heard the words of his belovedness all his growing up life. In Mary’s arms, by Joseph’s side in the workshop, in the flower-strewn meadows of Galilee.

In W.H. Auden’s Christmas oratorio, “For the Time Being”, he puts these words in Gabriel’s mouth:

...child, it lies

Within your power of choosing to

Conceive the child who chooses you.<sup>6</sup>

How will you in your power of choosing choose today?

1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1979), p.39.
2. Madeleine L'Engle, *The Glorious Impossible* (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1990)
3. Denise Levertov, "Annunciation", in *Selected Poems* (N.Y.: New Directions, 2002) pp.102-4
4. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 100.
5. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1993), p. 26.
6. W.H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio", *Collected Poems* (N.Y.: Random House, 1976), p.279.