

The Call of Mary

Luke 1:26-38

Dec 20, 2020

The theme of this Advent has been The Women of Advent, and now we come to Mary, the central figure of Advent. This is where we have been heading, where God has been heading, and here we are!

I

She was around 15 years of age and Joseph probably around 25 when they were betrothed in a sacred ceremony involving both families.

Betrothal was a much more serious and binding commitment than our modern engagements today. Only divorce could break it. If either partner had been unfaithful during this period it would have been considered adultery, and Deuteronomy had set the penalty: punishable by death! Had Joseph died during the betrothal period, Mary would have been legally his widow.

It was early in the betrothal when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary (He seems to have been busy these days.) He said to her: “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Mary began trembling. Most translations are too mild. She was more than “troubled”, more than “greatly troubled”, more than “perplexed”. The word “afraid” suffices.

The angel said what most angels in the Bible seem to need always to say first, “Be not afraid”, then added the reason why she needn’t to be afraid: “For you have found favor with God.” I have heard, though I have not counted, that the word most often spoken by God to us in the Bible is “Be not afraid.” It seems right to me, given our often fearful hearts.

In the children’s story *A Perfect Friend*, a young boy named Ben grows up loving elephants. He drew pictures of them, wanted his parents to adopt one for him to take care of, saved up his money to buy tickets to the circus to see them and one day got to walk up to an elephant name Sal and pet it. Ben felt like a whole new world

had come into being, and he heard Sal say these words to him, from Sal's mind to his own: *Behind you is safe. All around you is safe. Be fearless now.*¹

Maybe Mary heard words like that when the angel spoke.

Maybe the angel is trying to say the same words to us today.

The angel then spoke the words no one could have imagined or anticipated:

And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

Mary responded, "How can this be since I am a virgin?"

Zechariah had said similar *words* to Gabriel earlier, but the *tune* was completely different. When Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife would bear a son, Zechariah's words said, "Nah, I don't think so. That's not going to work!" When Mary said, "How can this be?" It was like she was saying, "I'm listening."

The angel then said,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child born will be a holy child; he will be called the son of God.

Then Mary said those world-changing words: “Behold, I am a handmaiden of the Lord.” (The word here is the feminine form of the word “servant”) “I am a servant of the Lord”, she said, “let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary said yes.

II

You may have gathered from what I have already said that her “yes” was fraught with peril. She could have been cast-out, shamed and shunned. She could have been stoned for adultery. The village tongues would wag as she began to show. She could have been quietly divorced by Joseph and sent away.

But she said yes. The poet W.H. Auden placed these words in Gabriel’s mouth:

...child, it lies

within your power of choosing to

Conceive the child who chooses you.²

Such is true for us as well. We have it within our power of choosing to choose the one who has chosen us. Paul talked about it as Christ being “formed in us.”

III

This scene is often called in Christian tradition “The Annunciation” or Announcement. But it was much more than an announcement of a divine *fait accompli*. It was a call! The call of Mary. Mary could say yes or no.

The Bible has many “call stories” in it, mostly, no surprise, involving men. And in most of them the men put up great resistance. Take Moses. When God called him out of the burning bush to return to Egypt and free the Hebrew people from slavery, Moses objected and objected. God, I stutter! “I am heavy of mouth and slow of tongue.” God said, “Who made the mouth, the tongue?”

When Moses said, “I have no power to go up against Pharaoh”, God demonstrated to him that God would give Moses all the power he needed.

Or Jeremiah. He was a young man when God called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah resisted: “I am only a youth....and I do not know how to speak!” God said: “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’. And I will put my words in your mouth.”

When I was growing up, preachers always said that when God calls there is always a great struggle. That’s how you know it’s a real call: you don’t want to do it! But a divine call may tap a deep willingness in you. There is no struggle. Your heart leaps to say yes.

With Mary there was no struggle, no protest when the angel offered the call. “I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Mary said yes.

Perhaps poetry best captures the moment of this divine encounter. As Denise Levertov in her poem “Annunciation”:

...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....

She did not say, “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 illumined her....

Consent,

courage unparalled,

opened her utterly. ³

When we answer God’s call *consent* and *courage* meet. We open ourselves. There comes a deep willingness we did not know we had, we join ourselves to God and to the unknown. Courage and consent.

With Mary's yes she became Israel at its deepest and best. She stood before the Lord, heard, listened and said yes. "Hear, O Israel!" She heard.

When Mary said yes she became the very model of the church—we are those who listen for God's voice, say yes when we hear it and bear in our bodily lived the word of God.

Soon after Joseph said yes too. And supported the life and the calling of his beloved. That was his courage and consent to the unseen God who speaks in dream language and through angels.

Soon after, they would be wed and begin this miraculous, perilous journey together with God.

V

This is the Call of Mary. What about ours? There is no such thing as an "uncalled life", only those who listen and those who don't. Perhaps the word "call" is a bit challenging itself. Perhaps we can call it God's "beckoning."

It can be a daily call: “Get up and give Jesus’ way another try.” It can be early in life, or in mid-life or much later. You’re never too old. In all of them change is afoot. Something new.

Frederick Buechner says that God calls us to the meeting place between our greatest joy, or hunger, on the one side, and the world’s great need on the other. There is a different meeting place for each of us, and it may change as we go through life.

Listen to your life. What things bring you joy? What is that hunger in you that inspires you to your best? Where are these wed in you to love the world God so loved?

Parker Palmer agrees with Joseph Campbell that what we are all looking for is “the rapture of being alive”. But that is not enough Palmer says. As children of God we moved from that place of rapture to become “advocates, celebrants, defenders of life wherever we find it.” And I think that as we become advocates, celebrants, defenders of life the “rapture of being alive” even deepens.

I believe churches can be called in these very same ways.

Where do we experience the stirring life Christ brings us? And who is our neighbor we are to love with Christ's own love?

Will we say yes? As persons, as church? Shonda Rhimes is one of our most acclaimed creators and writers of hit T.V. shows. She tells of the day when she and her older sister were talking and her sister said six words that stunned her and froze her in her tracks. Her sister with a tone of exasperation said, "You never say yes to anything!" Earlier in her life she had been happiness squared. But now in mid-life, with all that fame and celebrity, she had become miserable and had become a *no-machine*. Her sister's words shocked her into deep self-examination. She had become unhappy and her life was full of nos. So she set out in January to make this year *a year of yes*.

May this next year be that for us too, a year of yes, as we join in Mary's yes to God, to life, to joy.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come”, has come, and will come again and again. And let all our hearts “prepare him room.”

1. Reynolds Price, *A Perfect Friend*, (N.Y.: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2000), p. 90.
2. W.H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, in *Collected Poems* (N.Y.: Random House, 1976), p. 279
3. Denise Levertov, “Annunciation”, in *Selected Poems* (N.Y.: New Directions, 2002), p 162-4.
4. Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes* (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2015), p.11.