

The World Is with Child

Isaiah 7:10-16; Luke 1:26-38

In his book, *The Life of Jesus*, Frederick Buechner was reflecting on the Annunciation when the angel comes to call Mary to an adventure as momentous as any in the history of the world: “The announcement has been made and heard. The world is with child.”¹

The words stir something deep in me. As I underlined two Sundays ago, we sing “Joy to the WORLD the Lord is come,” not to a special few but to all. Franciscans believe that the saving act of God is the Incarnation—God becoming flesh—not the Atonement, Jesus dying on the cross. God has become flesh for all! What all can this mean?

I

Everything starts with a baby. Halford Luccock says it is slander to say that a baby’s chief passion is food. Rather he says, a baby’s chief passion is rearrangement! Our world is divided into two: BC, Before Child; and AD, After Deluge!

It happened that way for King Ahaz and the sign he asked from the Lord. He asked it of Isaiah the prophet. Ahaz is nervous about the Assyrians, a nation of

massive strength threatening the nation. Nothing like a crisis to want to ask a sign from the Lord! He wants some sign from God about what to do. And Isaiah obliged.

“Behold, look and see, a young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel, “God with us !!”

Then the good news King Ahaz was hoping for:

“For behold, by the time the child is eating curds and honey, and can tell the difference between good and evil, the territories of those two kings before whom you now cringe in fear will be deserted.”

Now that’s good news worth singing about: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”

A important note about translations and theological skirmishes. Isaiah’s Hebrew word (*almah*) for the young women with child means not “virgin” but “young woman”. But the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible before Jesus translated the word “virgin”, so the verse was quoted by the gospel writers Luke and Matthew to connect this birth hundreds of years before with the birth of Jesus. And so did most all translations through history, including the 1611 King James Version translation of the Bible many of us grew up with. Then, in 1947 came the Revised Standard Version, the version we have used most at Grace through the years. And lo and behold, this soon reviled translation translated the

Hebrew word correctly, a *young woman*, not virgin, shall conceive! And so a theological storm arose. Some called the Revised Standard Version a work of the devil, and there were Bible burnings of the translation. Its critics said, “It undermines the virgin birth of Jesus!” But does it? And should Christians be fighting over it? Does one have to believe in the virgin birth to be a Christian? Only if doctrine is more important than following the way of Jesus. It’s important to me as the mystery of God becoming flesh, not as a biological proof of the divinity of Jesus.

These questions gets us to the meaning of so-called “biblical prophecy.” The Hebrew prophets were concerned with what God was doing in the historical time in which they were living, not some far distant future. But what some call “biblical prophecy” today is about far in the future happenings, such as the use of the book of Revelation to predict the how and when of the end of the world 2,000 plus years later. The writers who use the Bible to prophesy about the end of the world and the so-called Rapture have prophesied all the way to the bank! The writer of Revelation, however, John on the Isle of Patmos, wrote to offer God’s hopeful word to terrified Christians living under the reign of Emperor Domitian who was persecuting and killing Christians everywhere. That’s where we must *start* as we read Revelation.

So, where are we now with this Isaiah prophecy? He was seeing God's saving work in his near future, before the baby to be born was even weaned. Can we then use Isaiah's prophesy to point to Jesus' birth? I think so, if we have the right concept of prophecy. Isaiah tells of how God is always working to save, and sometimes it has to do with a baby! We can take the virgin birth seriously without solving the science of it. *Reason defines; wonder comprehends*. In terms of God's saving work, the Bible does not repeat itself as in cycles, but it sometimes rhymes.

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney points the way in his poem, "The Cure of Troy.":

Human beings suffer
 They torture one another,
 They get hurt and get hard....

History says, Don't hope
 On this side of the grave...
 But then, once in a lifetime
 The longed-for tidal wave
 Of justice can rise up,
 And hope and history rhyme....

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.²

With this child Jesus it is more than “once in a lifetime”, when hope and history rhyme, but a *once-forever-time*. A child is born that splits history in two so a world can made one.

II

Luke sets his birth story on the stage of world history. In Caesar Augustus and King Herod’s time. Caesar Augustus’ birth was heralded throughout the Roman empire as the birth of the son of a god, savior of the world. But Luke tells of the birth of Jesus as the birth of the true son of God, Savior. And Luke’s story begins with an angel named Gabriel and a young teenager named Mary.

“Be not afraid” the angel said to her, the words God uses God’s messengers to say over and over again, those words we often most need to hear. Here, in this

encounter between the angel and Mary hang “the hopes and fears of all the years”.

Now, the Call of Mary, which is like the calling stories all through the Bible, the calls God has always been making to people like us. “Mary, a child is to be born in you, and you will call him Jesus” (which means “God Saves”, for God has come to save!) “How can this be”, she said, shyly, “since I know not a man!” The angel spoke a great mystery, and we must speak of “mystery” here, because scientific facts will not suffice when the miraculous happens:

“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.”

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” Unto us! And unto the whole human running race. And given! Yes given!

Sojourner Truth was a freed slave who worked for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women. To the anger of many men, she had the audacity to preach! Preach in public! One day she faced the predictable heckling of a man on the crowd. “How dare, you a woman, preach?!” She replied: “And how did Jesus come into the world? Through a God and a woman. Man had nothin’ to do

with it!” Now that’s a virgin birth message! Maybe that’s God’s message to us: Sometimes all we need in God’s saving work in the world is God and a woman!

“If you say yes,” the angel said to her, if you say yes. The poet Denise Levertov writes of this moment:

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

She did not cry, “I cannot, I am not worthy,”

nor “I have not the strength.”

She did not submit through gritted teeth,

raging, coerced,

bravest of all humans, consent illumined her....

Consent,

Courage unparalleled

opened her utterly.³

Call comes us all where courage and consent meet. Her words were “Here I am, a servant of the Lord” “Let it be unto me according to your word.” “Here I am”, the words throughout the Bible of those who say “Yes”. “I am available, let’s go!”

We are astounded by the courage of her consent. What a set of unknowns she faced, and potential harm. But “yes”, she said. “Here I am, a servant of the Lord”. Let it be. Let it be through me.

In his Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, the poet W.H. Auden imagines Gabriel saying to Mary:

“...child, it lies

Within your power of choosing to

Conceive the Child who chooses you.”⁴

Those words are ours to hear today:

Child, it lies

Within your power

To choose the Child

Who chooses you.

Will you choose him again, this year?

It will take *courage*; it will require, as of Mary, *consent*; and it will need *hope*, for as the Irish poet wrote, there are those moments when hope and history rhyme, even in us.

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Life of Jesus* (N.Y.: Weathervane Books, 1974), 30.

2. Seamus Heaney, "The Cure At Troy" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961)

3. Denise Levertov, "Annunciation", *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions Book, 2002), 162-64.

4. W.H. Auden, "For the Time Being", *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), 279.