

“Midwives, Angels, and Us”
Luke 1:26–38
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I’m not sure why we waited so long, given how many good things we had heard about the show, but Dana and I just started watching *Call the Midwife* this month and have thoroughly enjoyed it. Based upon the memoirs of a nurse named Jennifer Worth, it is a show that describes the midwife work of nurses and medically-trained nuns out of Nonnatus House, a convent in East London, in the 1950s. It is a painfully realistic yet ultimately uplifting show about women having and raising children in harsh conditions, and the amazing midwives who help them.

The images of this show were in my mind this week as I reflected upon what we call the Annunciation, the story found in Luke 1 about the angel Gabriel’s announcement to a young girl named Mary in Nazareth that she will conceive and give birth to a child who will be called the Son of the Most High. We tend to romanticize this story in light of its sacred meaning. Mary will give birth to Jesus, our Savior — what an amazing moment this must be for her!

But she doesn’t know all of this at the time, and even if she did, the reality of bringing this child into the world, much less raising him, is not very romantic. It is like the scenes in *Call the Midwife* when women living in poverty give birth to children without the benefits of modern medicine or even a minimum of sanitation. The rough scenes filled with screaming in East London in the 1950s would be more pleasant than giving birth in an animal shed in a mountain village in ancient Galilee.

In his commentary on Luke in the Smyth and Helwys series, Richard Vinson draws attention to the contrast between sentimentality and reality by comparing various artistic images of the Annunciation. While in Leonardo da Vinci’s view, Mary is a well-dressed, young blond sitting at a desk with elaborate carvings, reading and looking just as angelic as Gabriel, in Henry O. Tanner’s view, Mary has dark hair and eyes, and seems to be dressed in homespun, first-century Palestinian

clothing, as she looks toward a bright light with a mixture of confusion and anxiety. The latter seems more faithful to Luke's story. Mary's first response to the holy messenger is less, "What a sacred privilege," than, "You want me to do what?!"

How do we know this? Well, what does the text tell us about Mary? Not everything we would like to know, but a good bit. We know she is from the small village of Nazareth. We are not told exactly how old she is, but women in this time are typically wed between the ages of 13 and 20. The text says she is engaged to a man named Joseph, and is a virgin; so, she is probably closer to 13. We don't know that she lives in abject poverty, but we do know from the sacrifices she and Joseph bring to the temple — two doves — that she is not rich (Luke 2:24).

We don't know where Gabriel appears to Mary. There are two traditional sites — one at Mary's home and the other at the village spring where people gather. There are churches today at each site, one Catholic and the other Orthodox. And if the site of Mary's home is authentic, it is simple, just a small cave. She does not live in luxury. Last, but not least, as we have noted, the text refers to her as a virgin who is engaged. But the Hebrew text from Isaiah, which was included with the lighting of the Advent candle, refers to a young woman, not a virgin, giving birth to a son named Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). Either way, she is very young, engaged but not married, and of at best modest means.

So, having a child will raise questions of propriety. Giving birth to the baby will be no picnic. And the idea that anyone will believe that a simple girl like her from a town in the hills would be the subject of an angelic visitation and then the mother of a Messiah is ludicrous. In John, when Philip tells Nathanael they have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote — Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth — Nathanael replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

So, it seems reasonable to assume that Mary's first response to Gabriel's message is less "What a sacred privilege," than "You want me to do what?!" She doesn't want to have to call a midwife, especially at this point in her life. The text says she is perplexed, and lest we misinterpret this response as simple wonderment, Gabriel quickly says,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” He would not say, “Do not be afraid,” unless fear was written all over her face! “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” she asks, which can be viewed as wonderment too, or perhaps a kind of incredulity. “O my gosh,” we might render the thought, or, “Why should I believe that?” But this is more likely a real question about how she will become pregnant.

The answer is twofold: the Holy Spirit will come upon her — as the Spirit falls on Jesus in baptism and on everyone at Pentecost — and the power of the Most High will overshadow her — like the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is not a precise biological answer to Mary’s question. The biblical stories of Jesus’ birth are designed to tell us how incarnation works, how God can be fully present in one life, but they tell us how in a theological sense, not a biological one. Gabriel answers Mary’s question in a theological way. Is it enough for her?

It seems pretty overbearing. She doesn’t appear to have a choice. An all-powerful being falls on her and overshadows her. Yet Mary is not passive. She isn’t just spoken to like many female characters of this time; she speaks back again and again. She seems to have a say, her perspective matters, her response is critical. And eventually she says, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” It is a kind of submission, but it is self-chosen, not coerced. Mary chooses to play her role, not understanding all it that will mean — the sadness she will know at losing a child — but knowing enough.

So, what does all of this have to do with us? It is a fascinating narrative that might well be made into a popular series like *Call the Midwife*, but what is the message for us? Part of the message is that God works through courageous women like Mary. In our fear of making too much of Mary’s role, we have often made too little of it. Mary merits significant notice and adoration for her faithfulness and fortitude, but she also needs to be lifted up for the example she has provided for women throughout the generations. I’m not just talking about birthing children and dated understandings of obedience. I’m talking about courageous faith, the capacity to suspend earthbound reason for sacred possibility, and a willingness to do the dirty work that has to be done.

All of this describes Mary, and all of this describes the role women have played in the church for 2,000 years! Where would the church be without the faithful ministry of women? It was ironic that the churches whose pastors planned and carried out the takeover of our former denomination, talking often about the biblical role of women as being submissive and thus denying them access to leadership, would not have existed without the devoted work of women. It is no accident that the list of heroes of Baptist faith includes names like Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong, Fannie Heck and Sallie Bailey Jones. Far too often men have demanded the roles that make them feel important while women have played the roles that matter. As we near the dawn of the year 2021, it is long past time to do away with the hypocrisy!

Several years ago, I noted that I had portrayed everyone in the Christmas story except for Mary and the donkey. Many of you waited with interest to see which of these characters I would portray first. It was the donkey who isn't in the story but might be imagined as present in the animal shed. The truth is I am not going to portray Mary. My issue is not with gender crossing. In the theater, male actors often portray women. But should a man portray this woman? More to the point, how can I as a man even begin to imagine how she felt in today's story? On a certain level, no one, male or female, can understand. But a man has no point of reference for thinking about a messenger telling him he will sacrifice his physical being to make life possible.

Mary deserves notice and adoration for the role she plays in this story that shapes billions of lives. But there is another part of the message for us here — we have a role to play too. We cannot and need not give birth to Jesus. But we can continue the work of incarnation, which is what this story is ultimately about — enabling God to become flesh, the Holy to inhabit this world. This may require a bit of courage from us, the capacity to suspend earthbound reason, a willingness to do the dirty work, but if we are up to the task, if we are willing to say, “Let it be with me according to your word,” we can play our role.

I think of the ways we are present with each other in times of joy and sadness, offering an assurance of God's presence. I think of the mundane tasks of receiving clothing donations and sorting them out,

preparing meals for Family Promise and the Men's Shelter, which make God's love known. I think of crazy pipedreams like a curbside Toy Joy, a virtual Hanging of the Greens, a missions-based BBQ Food Truck — all ridiculous ideas that in God's grace have become reality and a continuation of incarnation. We can and often do find our role.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris put it this way.

Gabriel addresses his majestic words in an unlikely setting to an unlikely person, someone poor and powerless, extremely vulnerable in her place and time, a young peasant woman about to find herself pregnant before her wedding... The angel spells out the wonders that are about to ensue... Mary's son will be a king whose kingdom has no end. 'How can this be?' Mary exclaims, finally, and the angel says, 'The power of the Most High will overshadow you; *therefore* the child will be called Son of God.'

The angel's 'therefore' seems alarmingly significant, the seed of what Christian theologians have for well over a thousand years termed the scandal of the Incarnation. It also resonates with my own life. When a place or time seems touched by God, it is an overshadowing, a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans. But even in terrible circumstances and calamities, in matters of life and death, if I sense that I am in the shadow of God, I find light, so much light that my vision improves dramatically. I know that holiness is near.

And it is not robed in majesty. It does not assert itself with the raw power of empire... but it waits in puzzlement, it hesitates. Coming from Galilee, as it were, from a place of little hope, it reveals the ordinary circumstances of my life to be full of mystery, and gospel, which means 'good news.' (pp. 30-31)

There are times when our lives are touched by God, overshadowed in a holy way. When they are, we not only experience God's presence; we enable others to do so and thus extend the work of incarnation. That is good news, the good news Mary's story invites us to share, the good news of Christmas.