

“Mary Has a Choice, So Do We”

Luke 1:26-38

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

December 24, 2023

The story we have read from Luke 1 is traditional for this season and very familiar to us, we might even say “dear” to us, but it is a story that raises certain questions, some of them uncomfortable. Is this a historical narrative or a mythic story designed to reveal truth, just not in a historical way? It is a reasonable question. Two Gospels have a birth narrative, two do not. How are we to understand this birth narrative?

Where does this story take place, “the annunciation” we call it, Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she will give birth to a son who will be called the Son of God? One tradition says it happens at Mary’s home; another says it is at the community well. There is a church at each site, one Catholic, the other Orthodox; both are magnificent, though they are quite different.

These sorts of questions stir thought, but perhaps the most weighty question, especially in our time, is as to whether Mary has a choice in this matter of giving birth to a Messiah. It may seem like she does not which would portray God in a negative way. An angel shows up out of the blue, and not just any angel, Gabriel, who is a big deal. At this point, Mary is not a big deal. She is a very young woman from a simple family, thus a person with no power or agency in this time. How can she say “no” to anything Gabriel asks or commands?

Gabriel says she will conceive and give birth to a son and will name him Jesus and he will be called the Son of the Most High and reign on the throne of David forever. The informed reader knows this is a fulfillment of a prophecy found in 2 Samuel 7. Mary wonders how this can be, since she has not been with a man, and so Gabriel says the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* her. In the age of the #MeToo Movement and all that has led to it, this doesn’t sound very good. Is this an image of God forcing God’s way on Mary?

In the end, Mary does say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” But in the older translations, the text doesn’t say “servant”; it says “handmaid”; and for those of us who have read Margaret Atwood’s novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” or seen the television series based on it, this word alone pushes all sorts of buttons. Mary is the Lord’s *handmaid*? We have venerated Mary for her role in Jesus’ life and ministry, but does this poor young woman have a choice in all of this, does she have any say at all?

She does, though it takes a more careful reading of the text to see this, Mary has all sorts of agency. When the priest Zechariah is told by Gabriel that his wife Elizabeth will have a son in her dotage and this son will be filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah wonders how this can be since he is an old man, and his wife is “getting on in years,” as he puts it. He is immediately made mute until the child is born for his lack of faith.

After questioning Gabriel’s greeting, Mary wonders the same sort of thing, “How can this be, given the circumstances?” But she is not made mute. Instead, Gabriel keeps trying to convince her to embrace this venture because she needs convincing and apparently, he needs to convince her, she needs to agree.

Gabriel talks about how the Holy Spirit will come upon her, but this doesn’t seem to be enough to convince Mary. So, he says her relative Elizabeth will also have a special child, she is already six months pregnant, and apparently this is enough. Elizabeth is someone she knows and trusts. She too is an unusual choice to have a child. Mary is too young; Elizabeth is too old. Mary will have a companion on this strange journey, assuming she agrees to it, which, as we know, she does. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord;” she says, “let it be with me according to your word.”

So, Mary willingly agrees, but there is more to her agreement than we may initially realize. Katie Kirk, who is Porter Fellow at St. George’s College in Jerusalem, points out that in the Angelus, the Catholic prayer celebrating the incarnation, Mary says, “*Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum...*” – let it be with me according to your word. But the Latin *fiat* which literally means “be it” or “let it be” has taken on another connotation in English. It conjures up images of a powerful

plutocrat getting their way. Kirk notes that it is the same word used in the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Bible, in Genesis 1, where God says, “Let there be light, *fiat*,” and there was light. Mary is the one with the power here, ruling the day by fiat, she is in control, she has a choice, and when she makes it, when she says “yes,” Jesus is conceived (*The Christian Century*, December 2023, p. 27).

This is critical for Mary and for how we see God in this story. Mary does have a choice. God would not force anything, much less a pregnancy, on anyone, certainly not a vulnerable young woman. How would that square with the story of a Messiah who affirms women and dwells with the poor and outcast?

But this is also critical for us because it means that we have a choice too. We have a choice as to whether we embrace this child who is born, as to what we believe about him, as to whether we follow him in a way of service and love. We have a choice about everything we believe, real agency over our lives and faith, because God does not compel us to do anything. This is a truth scripture proclaims and one Baptists have embraced since our beginning.

When three Baptists were arrested in Massachusetts in 1651 for standing up for religious liberty, Roger Williams, who was Baptist, at least for part of his life, sent a letter to Governor John Endicott, saying:

Sir, I must be humbly bold to say that 'tis impossible for any man or men to maintain their Christ by their sword and to worship a true Christ, to fight against all consciences opposite to theirs, and not to fight against God in some of them and to hunt after the precious life of the true Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, remember, whither your principles and consciences must in time and opportunity force you! (*A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War*, Edwin S. Gaustad, p. 116).

Authentic faith cannot be coerced nor can genuine love be demanded by government or God. We always have a choice.

But what will guide our choice? If we find this story about a miraculous birth and a Savior for the world to be difficult to believe,

what might persuade us? Like Mary, we probably won't be convinced by the perceived importance of a given messenger. If Gabriel wasn't impressive enough, I'm not either. Like Mary, we probably won't be convinced by a list of important-sounding titles like Savior, Messiah, Son of the Most High, or Son of God, the latter being not just a title with sacred history but a political title as well, one used for Augustus Caesar, the adoptive son of Julius Caesar. For most of us, no title or claim, in and of itself, is compelling. People make all sorts of claims.

What moves Mary from questioning and resistance to acceptance and faith is the promise that there is someone she knows and trusts who will walk with her all along this journey, someone who has to make the same leap of faith she does, someone whose life will be transformed like hers, someone who is older than her and thus has more life experience, her relative Elizabeth. Perhaps it will be someone we know and trust who makes a difference for us.

For me, it was a thoughtful youth minister, someone I looked up to and trusted, someone who not only valued honesty but embodied it. Rick didn't accept anything at face value. He tested everything, questioned ideas that didn't seem to square with reality but embraced what he came to believe was true. He was also from a background like mine, not a bad family but one with challenges. He had to find health and faith for himself, like all people to some extent, but for some of us this reality is a little clearer a little sooner. That this man could embrace this story about a Messiah had a profound influence on me.

But even if we embrace the basic claims of the story, we also have a choice about whether we participate in it, that is, participate in what God is doing here – entering the messiness of life, dwelling with the poor and outcast, extending love to all. This is what is happening with the birth of a child, the birth of this child. It is obvious from the very beginning - in the choice of parents, the setting where the child will be born, the visitors he has, the titles that are used for him, including one with political overtones. God is doing something very specific here. God is doing whatever it takes to get to the people who need God most. The request for Mary is not just to believe it can happen but to take part in it. The request for us is the same. Mary has a choice, so do we.

We can reject the whole thing outright or choose to entertain the possibility of belief. We can believe that God was in Christ, that something miraculous happened, but that it was a singular event requiring nothing from us beyond coming to church and saying we believe, or we can embrace our role in participating in the ministry of incarnation, continuing God's work in this world. We can reject the story, we can believe it, or we can live it.

No one will compel us to choose the latter, not even God, but a lot hinges on our choice. When Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," Jesus is conceived. What might happen in this world of so much need if we were to say "yes" to all that God asks of us?