



## “To Us, A Child is Born: Mary”

December 22, 2019

Luke 1:26-45

Have you have seen Leonardo Da Vinci’s depiction of this morning’s first scripture lesson, the most pivotal conversation in all of scripture? Da Vinci shows Mary sitting with her right hand on the loom at which she has been weaving. She holds her left hand palm facing the messenger Gabriel, as if to say...what does that hand say? Is she greeting the angel and the unexpected turn of events he announced or is she protesting, “Wait a minute here. None of what you are saying makes a bit of sense to me!” Meanwhile, Gabriel kneels before her, his brown wings at rest upon his back after his long flight from the high heavenly places. His head is bowed, his eyes alive with hope. He, along with God and all of creation, waits with breathless suspense to hear what Mary’s answer will be. I think this is what wonder looks like—the sense that God’s own messenger is uncertain of what will happen next. All of history, the salvation of humankind and the redemption of the world hinges on the response of Mary. I think this is what wonder looks like.

It looks like God taking a risk. Almighty God choosing to be vulnerable before a human creature. It looks like God’s own presence entering the world the form of a tiny infant, the clearest picture of vulnerability we can imagine. This has always been the way of our God; entrusting human beings to carry out the work of the kingdom. God chooses to trust us—chooses the path of love over the ways of coercive power.

Back to the scene. How will Mary respond? She opens her mouth and speaks words she knew by heart, words she learned in Sunday school. Mary knew. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.” Do you recognize it? It is the answer of the heroes of our faith, of Abraham, Jacob, Samuel, David, Isaiah and, now, a young girl named Mary. “Here I am,” she says, and in these few, simple, and profound words, Mary announces to the world her brave and risky decision. The angel exhales, relieved

that his visit has not been in vain. God smiles, delighted that another chosen one has responded in faith. The powers of sin and death are given notice that their days are coming to an end. The groaning, hurting, broken world is given reason to hope again. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness can see the flicker of holy light. A child will be born...God’s gracious plan can continue to unfold.

In Mary’s decision to say yes to God’s redemption of the world, the miracle is made possible. My mentor and friend David Bartlett observed that, “Mary is the first Christian because she hears the word of the Lord and accepts it as a word about herself.” The passage of centuries may have numbed us to the extraordinary power in Mary’s few words. We read her lines every year; she always says yes; she is, after all, the saintly mother of Jesus. But not yet. Not here. Not in this moment. First, she makes the decision to join in God’s movement of salvation, putting practicality and logic aside to enter the story of God’s redemption of the world.

Mary courageously steps into the story of God’s love and accepts her leading role. This Advent at Second we have been guided by the words and actions of four faithful women who respond to God’s call. We’ve considered how their stories must be our stories if we are to live into God’s vision. This morning, this fourth Sunday of Advent, in these final days leading to Christmas, we remember the one who brought God’s love into the world *and* we acknowledge our call to do the same. Listen to the words of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, words that challenge and inspire us: We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.

Having heard, believed, and accepted the message of Gabriel, Mary quickly makes her way to Elizabeth's home. We heard Elizabeth's story last Sunday—her own annunciation and acceptance of God's gift and call. When she hears Mary's news, Elizabeth (and her son) respond with joy. She speaks a blessing over her young relative. Blessed are you...you who believed what God promised you. Mary knew. Mary believed. Mary trusted.

So, how do we faithfully follow Mary's example? How do we bear God's word into the world in our time? This is the Advent Sunday centered on love. How do we who are gathered in worship today carry God's love out of this sacred space?

Last year, on the recommendation of a friend, I took an afternoon to watch *Summer in the Forest*, a stunning documentary about Jean Vanier. Vanier, who died in May of this year, was the founder of the L'Arche, a community in France where people with disabilities live alongside those who care for them. In the fifty-five years since Vanier began his community with four residents, more than 150 communities have been established in 38 countries. The uniqueness of Vanier's philosophy is the conviction that those with disabilities are teachers and gifts of God, not burdens or inconveniences. I remembered that this week when a friend shared Vanier's definition of love: "to love someone is not to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them: 'You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.'" What if this is what means for us to bear God's love? To speak words of blessing as Elizabeth spoke to Mary. To see, really see, all of God's people as worthy of love.

The story of Mary's response to God's promise does not end where our reading stopped this morning. Hearing Elizabeth's joyful blessing, Mary bursts into poetic song, spontaneous words that project a prophetic vision of God's kingdom. In a few moments, we will sing together a version of her words, her song, her *Magnificat*.

Leave it to God to choose a poet to bring God's love into the world. Like all good poetry, Mary's words open our eyes to what is true. Like the beatitudes that her infant son will speak as a young man, the *Magnificat* of Mary does not predict the future. It re-describes the present

through the lens of God's love. It is not that the poor and lowly will be blessed in some heavenly realm beyond death—the poor and lowly *are blessed*. God comes to them, God speaks through them, God's work in the world depends on them. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.

Mary speaks of the reign of God, which will not rely on violence and exploitation, which will begin with the humble and not the powerful, which will trust human hands to nurture the God of the universe. Of course she sings—if God is with her, who can stand against her?

While an intern at a Children's Hospital during seminary, I met a woman whose five-month-old twins had still not left the hospital. Every morning, she was there. Every night, she was there. Holding. Praying. Crying. Waiting. Pleading. Rituals of love and compassion. "What gives you strength?" the wide-eyed novice chaplain asked. With a half-smile and eyes that showed wisdom beyond her 19 years, the mother simply responded, "I know a new day is coming." She knew.

There is a fundamental truth that stands at the heart of the Advent season. It is this: no matter what we are waiting for, we cannot receive it unless there is a place for it in our hearts. When the messenger of God came to Mary, there was a place in her heart and room in her imaginations to receive this promise. If you are feeling more anxious than expectant, more worried than worshipful, if the spirit of the season seems elusive to you this year, then take a deep breath and open yourself to the possibility that God is speaking to you—I trust you. You can trust yourself. Bring love into my world. Advent is a season of waiting. Mary's words remind us that the whole world is waiting. Waiting for hope. Waiting for peace. Waiting for joy. Waiting, all of creation waiting...for God...and for us. In this waiting, groaning world, let love be born in you. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John Stendahl, "Mary Said Yes," *Living By the Word*, Chalice Press, 2005, p. 12.