

To a Girl Named Mary

Luke 1:26-38

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Russ Matteson

In the beginning of Luke's gospel the angel Gabriel is quite busy as God's messenger. The first story in Luke has Gabriel showing up in Jerusalem in the Holy of holies to deliver a message to the old priest Zechariah, letting him know that his wife will bear a son in her old age. Now, as the story moves on, Gabriel is in need of a good GPS system to make his way to the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. We tend to think of Nazareth as a well known and important place, but in the time of Jesus and the early years after, Nazareth was an unknown place. It's like talking to someone who doesn't know Southern California so you let them know that you are from San Dimas which is near LA. They don't know where you live, but they have some vague idea about Los Angeles.

Gabriel is a long way from Jerusalem, and the person he is to visit in Nazareth is a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph who is from the house of David. Gabriel is not talking to a priest in the temple any more. This time he has a message from God to a girl named Mary. And what a message he has to share, the invitation Gabriel brings to Mary.

Theologian John Shea, in his commentary *Eating with the Bridegroom* (Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 34-38), takes us into the underlying spiritual activity that we hear going on in today's gospel passage. Shea shares that Gabriel's opening words to Mary name a knowing he has about her, a knowing that begins to reach through her defenses when an angel shows up, a knowing that opens her spirit to ponder what might be going on.

He greets her as God's favored one, in some translations Gabriel greets Mary as one who is "Full of Grace". God is aware of the abundant spirit that Mary possesses, and her openness to be a part of the divine mission in the world - even if she doesn't quite understand what it means yet. "The Lord is with you" creates an awareness in Mary that God is doing something through her life (p. 35). Mary's attention has been piqued, she doesn't send the visitor away, but she sifts through his greeting wondering what it means. She wonders what invitation to the divine mission is about to unfold in her hearing.

And as Gabriel unfolds the incarnational vision, as he shares that God's favor is inviting Mary to have a role, to become the mother of the child who will be called Jesus and known as the Son of the Most High. Through her hearing her spirit continues to open to this divine, and at the same time so human, idea of God to come into the world through a girl who is no one, in a place that is nowhere, and through this God's kingdom will be established and the world will be changed.

She hears and she asks, not as an objection, but because her spirit is curious and wants to know, she asks "How? How will this happen to a girl named Mary?" Through

the Spirit of God, is the answer from Gabriel. Old wombs can be filled, new wombs can be filled. "With God, nothing is impossible." The invitation has been given.

Poet Denise Levertov, in her poem "Annunciation" (*A Door in the Hive*), writes of Mary in this moment so beautifully that I really must share it with you this morning... (sourced from <https://faberinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Denise-Levertov-22Annunciation22.pdf>)

*But 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.*

And near the end of the poem, Levertov speaks of Mary in that moment when Gabriel is done:

*This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.*

*A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.*

*She did not cry, '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.*

God saw what no one else may have seen or sensed in a girl named Mary. Courage, bravery, worth, hope. You might be thinking of other words that you sense are present in the abundant and open spirit of this girl named Mary.

It is this girl named Mary who opens the wonder of incarnation, God present with us in human form, for us to see and try to understand. It is Mary's consent and then illumination that allows the God Spirit to dwell in her and to bring forth Jesus. It is this girl named Mary who shows us how to ponder what God is doing, in her flesh and in

those who she encounters in the time of her pregnancy and birth and beyond. It is this girl named Mary who will nurture and parent and follow her child Jesus, always pondering and open to this idea of God's that she is a partner in.

Levertov wonders in her poem if there aren't annunciations in other lives, in most lives? Does God still extend the invitation to people to be part of an idea that needs someone's spirit to give it life and energy, to make it happen?

I've thought a lot about that this week, and it took me back to a moment in 1988. I went to the Church of the Brethren's Annual Conference for the first time that year, just for the weekend. On Saturday they were celebrating the 40th anniversary of Brethren Volunteer Service and the impact the volunteers through the years had made in various places, in ways big and small. And as they moved to the end of the celebration they invited current volunteers to stand, and then former volunteers to stand, and then those who would commit to serving in the next five years to stand. And I realized that I had stood in that moment.

I have often said I didn't make the decision to stand, but this week I realized that I did decide to stand. I didn't think about the choice in my head and decide to stand up. Rather my spirit heard the annunciation of God's Spirit inviting me to an idea, and from deep within my being my spirit, my truest self, brought me to my feet. And my world began to change as God's idea grew within me. In three months, with many little miracles along the way, I left my career and graduate school, sold my car and gave away most things, and showed up as a volunteer in unit #187 and the course of my life has been different ever since. The message came to a young man named Russ from Boulder Hill in the far suburbs of Chicago.

As we move further into the season of Advent, as we open our spirits to pondering the meaning and power of the incarnation, of Jesus come as a child to show us the way and to invite us to follow along in the way of God; the message from Gabriel to a girl named Mary opens for us the window to consider what the incarnation means for us. In one moment, like the one I shared, my spirit hears the invitation, and yet another time and time again, I am sure that I have missed it. But God continues to seek to bring forth birth within me, within us, seeking to continue the revelation that was begun in Jesus.

Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic from the late 13th and early 14th century, is credited with the following thought which I want to leave us to contemplate as we consider the incarnation of Jesus today. Eckhart wrote:

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. (sourced from <https://www.amyoden.com/single-post/2018/05/16/mothers-of-god>)

This, then, is the fullness of time: When the vision of God is begotten in us. The incarnation of God in Jesus was, is, and continues to be present in our world. And the miracle of Christmas just may be that we are invited, we are needed, by God to have a role in keeping the Christ alive in our time and culture. It was an invitation to a girl named Mary. It was an invitation to a young man named Russ. It is an invitation to an older guy named Tom from Rancho Cucamonga. It is an invitation to you, at whatever stage in your life and wherever you are, to have a part in bringing forth the reign of God. And it is an invitation to this church community, in this time, in La Verne, California. May we who are noone and are from nowhere, like a girl named Mary, have the courage, bravery, and hope to consent and join in God's continuing work. Amen.