

“Intervention by Incarnation”

Isaiah 35: 1-10, Luke 1: 46-55

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What we hear this morning in Luke’s Gospel is the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song. It is Mary’s incredible response to God after being chosen to become the God-bearer. What we did not hear is the part where the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and invites her to accept this awesome responsibility. Yes I did say “invite.” What we left out was Mary’s questioning, her momentary doubts, and then her simply sophisticated submissive response. What we missed was her need to run and confide in someone she loves and trusts about what is happening to her. After Mary has a moment to digest this amazing news, she heads to her Cousin Elizabeth’s house, knowing that Elizabeth will understand because she too has been pondering her own miracle. Elizabeth, old and seemingly barren, is also pregnant with a son. Her child will play a pivotal role in Mary and her child’s lives. Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist. Together these women and their sons will change the world.

What we hear this morning are the words of not only a mother and God bearer, but a prophet as well. Mary does not go to Elizabeth’s simply to compare notes about pregnancy; they do not consult about remedies to fight morning sickness or how to deal with their inevitable fatigue. Perhaps those conversations will happen later. Mary goes to share her joy and to prophesy. It is astounding that Mary is joyous about what has happened. After all, she is a young, unwed, woman who is now pregnant without the benefit of marriage. She does not fully understand how this could happen to her. (Perhaps she is not unlike most unwed, teenaged mothers who receive this surprising news?) How will the rest of her tiny village respond? She has every reason to be frightened and confused. She wonders how this could be since she is a virgin. The angel Gabriel rationally explains that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, the power of the most high will overshadow her and the child will therefore be holy and be called the Son of God. She hears of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy and is told that nothing is impossible with God. Now there’s an understatement given the circumstances! She ponders this for a while and then dutifully replies, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Wow. Think about it for a moment. How would you respond if an angel invited you to become the God bearer? My response would not be so immediate or as submissive as Mary’s. I can imagine a whole lot more hemming and hawing. Why me? How can this be? What does this mean? What will happen to me when the world begins to understand what is happening? What will Joseph say? What about my parents? Then come the denials. I am not worthy. Pick someone else. Perhaps all these things went through Mary’s mind, but we don’t know about it. All we know is that she says to the angel who is God’s messenger, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” and immediately gets to work telling Elizabeth what this means for the rest of the world.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house what you don't hear is the astounding greeting Mary receives. Elizabeth greets Mary with a loud cry "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Why the over the top greeting? It is as if Elizabeth can not contain herself. Her joy spills out everywhere. She does not stand back in awe. She does not say to Mary as a wise, older companion might, "come here child, let me take a look at you." No, she responds in a loud voice all the ways that Mary is blessed, the ways Elizabeth understands what is truly happening here. How could she know these things? Such clarity is a miracle.

The Holy Spirit was working overtime. First she is busy blessing these women and assuring the offspring they will soon deliver are holy. Then there is the wisdom that simply can not be contained. Mary responds to this astounding blessing with her own prophetic song. Right there in Elizabeth's living room she begins to sing, "my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah are the first to hear it, but it is not just for them. It is also for her, Mary, and for the Mighty One who has done great things for her. The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says the *Magnificat* is also "for Gabriel, who first gave her the good news, and for all who will benefit from it—for the proud and powerful who will be relieved of their swelled heads, for the hungry who will be filled with good things, for the rich who will be sent away empty so that they have room in them for more than money can buy. Her song is for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—for Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel—for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life." It was all happening inside of Mary and here she was singing about it ahead of time.

I had heard the term "God bearer" before, but I never thought it applied to me. Mary was the God bearing One, the theotokos (one of those fancy Greek words you learn in seminary.) How could there be another? My whole concept of god bearing shifted when I read, *The God bearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. The youth team for the Board of Discipleship Education explored this fascinating concept a few years ago. When we read the book, I understood what she was talking about theoretically. Now, a few years later and a whole lot more seasoned in my ministry it makes a lot more sense.

Kenda Dean says that God's message to Mary and to us has two parts—affirmation and expectation. *Because* Mary is beloved by God, *because* she has found favor in God's eyes, God has a plan for her. It is an astonishing plan: never mind the angel in the living room, never mind the impossible conception, never mind the fact that this child will grow up to be king. God has just asked a teenager to bring salvation into the world! All of us should stand in awe of this moment. What perhaps should bring us to our knees is that Mary says yes. God does not enter her by force. God waits for her simple and powerfully spoken ascent, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Dean goes on to say, "God did not choose a teenager to bear salvation to the

world by accident. Who else would agree to such a plan? While the coming of Jesus Christ in a virgin's womb is the unrepeatable mystery of God, God invites all of us to become God bearers—persons who by the power of the Holy Spirit smuggle Jesus into the world through our own lives, who by virtue of our yes to God find ourselves forever and irrevocably changed.” We become like Mary, we too are loved by God, we have found favor in God's eyes, therefore God has a plan for us. As with Mary, ministry does not end with her transformation, it begins.

We stand in awe of Mary's wisdom and courage at such a young age. Every time I hear this story, I pray that I can set aside those things in my life that keep me from responding as she did. Mary gives us a glimpse of the ministry that will be fulfilled through her child. Even at the beginning, through Mary, the Holy Spirit speaks of how God's plan is to bring down the mighty and lift up the lowly—to feed the hungry poor and turn away the rich. Life as they have known it has now changed, in ways they can not yet comprehend. As a servant of this promise-keeper, Mary is about to become the God bearer.

Mary said yes to God, even though she had no idea was she was getting into. She spoke prophetically of a world in which the lowly like herself would receive justice, where those who were hungry would be fed and have their needs met. She trusted that through her, God would make it so. God has a plan for us and our ministry begins when we say yes to God, no matter how uncertain we may be, no matter how frightening it may seem. Kenda Dean says such a decision to say yes to God, “flings open the doors of our souls so that grace no longer needs to sneak in through the cracks. Now the Holy Spirit rushes in ‘like a mighty wind’ and fills us, overshadows us, transforms us by forming Jesus within us, restoring us to the image in whose likeness we were created. Now our soul-wombs, already prepared by grace, can carry Jesus into the world.”

That is how the Advent story becomes our story. We clear the way in our soul for Jesus to dwell and then to be carried into the world. We offer ourselves as instruments of peace, as laborers of love, as justice keepers. We make a conscious effort to let go of the pain and the prejudices and the sin that clutter the place where the Holy One is waiting to dwell. Be prepared, all it takes is for you to say “yes” and God will take care of the rest. The moment we say yes to God we become bearers of God's word. From the second we lower our defenses—“here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”—the Holy Spirit enters us, fills us, takes us over, changes everything about us, and through us, the world in which we live.” This is the mystery and the power of the incarnation, the God made flesh, to live and dwell not only among us but within us. Blessed are you! Amen

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Singing Ahead of Time,” *Home by another Way*, Cowley Publications, 1999.

Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The God bearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Upper Room Books, 1998.