

Let It Be! (Luke 1:26-38)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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What were your earliest impressions of Mary, the mother of Jesus? Did your family have a manger scene in the house? Mine did. But my first vivid impression of Mary was when the church of my growing up had one of those living manger scenes with live animals, and straw and a wooden stable and everyone in costumes. When the girl I had a crush on was chosen to be Mary I made an emphatic case that I would be cast as Joseph. My next encounter with Mary was a little more theological. Being the adolescent skeptic that I was I argued with the teacher of my confirmation class about the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. I don't believe it I said. That's it. The sum total of my interest in Mary. So really I have to say I have not paid much attention to Mary over the years until much later. Recently I have more and more wondered if we Protestants are missing out on something. Are we missing something by paying so little attention to this woman who was there at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' life? Are we missing out on the Mary who is so central to the faith of Christians around the world? This morning as we begin this spiritual journey with Mary through the Advent Season, let's gaze deeply into this encounter between the Angel Gabriel and Mary. This scene that is known throughout the history of the church as Mary's annunciation. Annunciation means very simply announcement and that is what the angel Gabriel does here. Gabriel announces to Mary and to the world that God is doing a new thing. Let us look closely at Mary's response to see what Mary can teach us about an advent way of life. And here is the crux of the matter it seems to me. Most Christian preaching, most of the time, asks women of faith to imagine their relationship to God through the lives of male characters of the Bible. But here in this story of Mary's annunciation, may all men here, may all of us imagine our lives in relationship to God through the experience of this young woman. Let us see how Mary as a woman of faith remains a model for all Christians, men and women alike.

What do you notice about our story? What got your attention about this scene? Our story begins with the words of the Angel Gabriel, "Hail favored one!" First thing that I noticed is this. Mary doesn't really do anything to bring about this encounter. This story begins with God's initiative. The angel Gabriel is sent to her. She doesn't seek this encounter out. God seeks her out. God notices Mary. God is watching her. God is aware of her life. Maybe that is the first point of contact that each of us might find with Mary. Most of us would not really believe that God notices us. Most of us figure that maybe God is watching us on Sunday, if only to see if we'll make it to church. But we wonder if God even notices us, let alone favors us, the rest of the week. Work, school, our home life – these can seem like such mundane things and hardly worth God's attention. And yet in this story we hear about God noticing Mary who by all accounts is a no-body. She is a young woman without any particular education or preparation, so far as we know. Mary has no credentials that would justify God's attention. Mary is female in a world ruled by men. No reference is made to Mary's family of origin. Not even there can she find a credential to commend her. Mary holds no official position in the religious establishment. She does not live in the capital city of Jerusalem the center of action. Nazareth is in the hinterlands. In the boonies you might say. The bottom line is that Mary has no assets, no family credentials. No position or status. In the eyes of the world, she is an insignificant nobody. Her insignificance is her primary significance. And maybe that is what she can first teach us. That God sees us.

Watches us. No matter how much of a no-body we consider ourselves to be we are not a no-body in God's eyes. Or as one contemporary translation of the Bible translates this greeting from Gabriel to Mary: "Good morning! You are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out. God be with you". And so may we with Mary hear God noticing us, greeting us: Hail Mary full of grace.

The second thing we notice is that Mary is perplexed. Well no kidding. At the same time, the only thing Gabriel has said so far is "the Lord is with you." There's been no mention of pregnancy or a virgin birth. Rather, simply, the Lord is with you. Let's be honest. One of my fellow preachers wrestling with this text wrote: "Perplexity is exactly our response when the Lord shows up. To me? Why me? Why now? I think we underestimate the impact of what it means to know that God is actually around. Here. With us. Doesn't God have better things to do? Bigger things to take care of? More major issues to maintain besides me? Perhaps some more perplexity would do us well." On that day the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was "blessed among women" because God was calling her. The Bible is full of this sort of thing. Here is somebody minding his or her own business, and then, as if from out of nowhere, there comes a call. The person is often startled to be called by God. Therefore, Gabriel says to Mary, "Do not be afraid." But even in her perplexity Mary is open, trusting, and ready to believe. What *is* it, exactly, that Mary believes? Yes, she believes Gabriel's announcement that she will bear a child. But before that, she believes that God noticed her, that God favors her, that God has blessed her and has great plans for her. And this, I think, leads us to a central dynamic not only in the Gospel but also the Christian life itself: the most important, thing we are called to believe is that God similarly notices, favors, and blesses us. And once we believe that, we can do incredible things. Rev. David Lose reflects on this moment by saying: "Blessing, you see, is a powerful thing and, sadly, a rare thing. We live in a world that seems geared toward rewards and punishments. Whether at work or school or even home, we have been conditioned to expect people to give us only what we deserve. But blessing operates on a different logic. Blessing is never deserved, but always a gift. Blessings intrude into, interrupt, and ultimately disrupt our *quid pro quo* world to announce that someone sees us as worthy and special apart from anything we've done. You see, here's the thing: I think most of us have a hard time believing that God favors us. But when this dark skinned, unmarried teenager this nobody young girl believes God's blessing and accepts God's favor, the world begins to turn".

The next thing we might notice is Mary's question: how can this be? Mary was simply wondering out loud how can it be when there is an obvious roadblock to this pregnancy in that she has no knowledge of men. Mary's question (how can this be?) is understandable. But in response to the angel Michael, in the face of mystery and miracle Mary's question was moving past perplexity into faithful awe before the God for whom nothing is impossible. Mary's primary significance seems to be her insignificance- we have already noted that. But maybe this is precisely why this no-body is the favored one. Maybe this is why her awe is accepted as good faith. Because this is the first dramatic clue about the nature of God's reign coming into the world; what has come to be known as the great overarching theme of Luke's Gospel. This is the Kingdom of God as the Great Reversal. God's reign is a great reversal turning the world upside down or depending on your point of view, right side up. All no-bodies are somebodies in God's realm. The lowly are lifted on high. The might are brought down to low degree. How can this be? Mary asks and we ask. We know with Mary that "our lives are never finally our own; that we

are not fully in charge of our existence. We know with Mary that our destiny began before we were born and is not complete until after we die and that only in rare moments do we get a sense of what our lives ultimately mean. Like Mary we are reminded of this when startling news, joyful or sorrowful irrupts in our lives” and evokes the question that Mary voiced: How can this be? Mary’s puzzlement grants us permission to take time to adjust to astonishing news, to question whether the trials and tragedies we experience are all there is to our lives? Or with Mary to believe that God’s magnificent promises are ultimately real. How can this be we ask with Mary?

The fourth and perhaps most important thing to notice about this encounter between Gabriel and Mary is that Mary makes a commitment. “Here am I.” Like the prophets of old, she commits herself to the God who chooses the unexpected. At the same time, she entrusts herself to a new self, to a willingness to imagine a future beyond her present, to embrace an identity of which she has little knowledge or understanding but to which she willing to commit. Mary accepts the call of God. She says, “I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” Anne Lamott in her book *Plan B* reflects on her own pilgrimage of faith that has carried this Presbyterian woman through the vulnerabilities of a cocaine addiction, severe depression, divorce and all the challenges of single parenting. Lamott testifying to her own “un-Presbyterian” devotion to Mary writes: “Hail Mary full of grace. This is what the angel says before telling Mary that she will be Jesus’ mother. : “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. And Anne Lamott concludes: “This is so not me. When I used to lie in the dark grinding my teeth, utterly whipped, surrender finally came and then the miracle: motherly kindness toward my own screwed up self. Hail Mary full of grace”. The poet Denise Levertov gets Mary exactly right when she muses: “We are told of Mary’s meek obedience. But no one mentions her courage. The engendering Spirit did not enter her without her consent”. In the midst of Mary’s vulnerability, we catch glimpses of her saying yes to God; we see her with great courage surrendering herself to God’s unfolding purpose for the world. In her annunciation, the no-body Mary defines herself not by her father or by her future husband and his family. Mary defines herself by God’s family and her singular role in this new creation. Here the behavior of this young woman departs from all the traditional norms and conventions of her social world. Mary embraces her vulnerability with courageous surrender. I am the handmaiden of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that it seems to me that the church has all too often asked women to imagine their relationship to God through the stories of the men of the Bible. But here is one story that challenges all of us, men and women alike to imagine our relationship to God through the experience of a young woman who is mysteriously pregnant. And so I ask you: where are you on that journey between “how can this be?” toward the great affirmation: “let it be to me according to your word”? What new life is stirring in your womb? Yes, guys I am asking you. What new life is being engendered in you? This encounter with Mary has helped this man for the first time in his life, find meaning in the so-called doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Since my confirmation class as a boy until this past week I have been a complete skeptic about the doctrine of the Virgin Birth that has its origins in this story of Mary’s Annunciation. I have always questioned what value could this idea of the Virgin birth possibly have for me or for the church. And now I think I have a clue. The contemplative monk Thomas Merton once said the goal of all

his prayer was to find that virgin point at the center of our being, that virgin point untouched by illusion, a point of pure truth ...which belongs entirely to God, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point, this virgin point of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us". Mary is witness to that virgin point in each one of us, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, that virgin point where God can be born in us. We may also say with Mary: how can this be? How can God be born in me – a no-body? But with Mary let all God's people say: let it be to me according to your word!